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ROBERT BROWNING

Mr BROWNING'S STUDY IN DE VERE GARDENS.

From a drawing by Felix Moscheles.

LIFE AND LETTERS

OF

ROBERT BROWNING

BY

MRS. SUTHERLAND ORR

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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I CANNOT quite ascertain, though it might seem easy to do so, whether Mr. and Mrs. Browning remained in Florence again till the summer of 1859, or whether the intervening months were divided between Florence

and Rome; but some words in their letters favor the latter supposition. We hear of them in September from Mr. Val Prinsep, in Siena or its neighborhood; with Mr. and Mrs. Story in an adjacent villa, and Walter Savage Landor in a "cottage" close by. How Mr. Landor found himself of the party belongs to a little chapter in Mr. Browning's history for which I quote Mr. Colvin's words.[1] He was then living at Fiesole with his family, very unhappily, as we all know; and Mr. Colvin relates how he had thrice left his villa there, determined to live in Florence alone; and each time been brought back to the nominal home where so little kindness awaited him.

. . . "The fourth time he presented himself in the house of Mr. Browning with only a few pauls in his pocket, declaring that nothing should ever induce him to return.

"Mr. Browning, an interview with the family at the villa having satisfied him that reconciliation or return was indeed past question, put

[1] *Life of Landor*, p. 209.

himself at once in communication with Mr. Forster and with Landor's brothers in England. The latter instantly undertook to supply the needs of their eldest brother during the remainder of his life. Thenceforth an income sufficient for his frugal wants was forwarded regularly for his use through the friend who had thus come forward at his need. To Mr. Browning's respectful and judicious guidance Landor showed himself docile from the first. Removed from the inflictions, real and imaginary, of his life at Fiesole, he became another man, and at times still seemed to those about him like the old Landor at his best. It was in July, 1859, that the new arrangements for his life were made. The remainder of that summer he spent at Siena, first as the guest of Mr. Story, the American sculptor and poet, next in a cottage rented for him by Mr. Browning near his own. In the autumn of the same year Landor removed to a set of apartments in the Via Nunziatina in Florence, close to the Casa Guidi, in a house kept by a former servant of

Mrs. Browning's, an English woman married to an Italian.[1] Here he continued to live during the five years that yet remained to him."

Mr. Landor's presence is also referred to, with the more important circumstance of a recent illness of Mrs. Browning's, in two characteristic and interesting letters of this period, one written by Mr. Browning to Frederic Leighton, the other by his wife to her sister-in-law. Mr. — now Sir F. — Leighton had been studying art during the previous winter in Italy.

KINGDOM OF PIEDMONT, SIENA, *October* 9, 1859.

MY DEAR LEIGHTON, — I hope — and think — you know what delight it gave me to hear from you two months ago. I was in great trouble at the time about my wife, who was seriously ill. As soon as she could bear removal we brought her to a villa here. She slowly recovered and is at last *well* — I be-

[1] Wilson, Mrs. Browning's devoted maid, and another most faithful servant of hers and her husband's, Ferdinando Romagnoli.

lieve — but weak still and requiring more attention than usual. We shall be obliged to return to Rome for the winter — not choosing to risk losing what we have regained with some difficulty. Now you know why I did not write at once — and may imagine why, having waited so long, I put off telling you for a week or two till I could say certainly what we do with ourselves. If any amount of endeavor could induce you to join us there — Cartwright, Russell, the Vatican, and all — and if such a step were not inconsistent with your true interests — you should have it: but I know very well that you love Italy too much not to have had weighty reasons for renouncing her at present — and I want your own good and not my own contentment in the matter. Wherever you are, be sure I shall follow your proceedings with deep and true interest. I heard of your successes — and am now anxious to know how you get on with the great picture, the *Ex voto* — if it does not prove full of beauty and power, two of us will be shamed, that's all! But *I* don't fear,

mind! Do keep me informed of your progress, from time to time — a few lines will serve — and then I shall slip some day into your studio, and buffet the piano, without having grown a stranger. Another thing — do take proper care of your health, and exercise yourself; give those vile indigestions no chance against you; keep up your spirits, and be as distinguished and happy as God meant you should. Can I do anything for you at Rome — not to say, Florence? We go thither (*i. e.* to Florence) to-morrow, stay there a month, probably, and then take the Siena road again.

[The next paragraph refers to some orders for photographs, and is not specially interesting.]

Cartwright arrived here a fortnight ago — very pleasant it was to see him: he left for Florence, stayed a day or two, and returned to Mrs. Cartwright (who remained at the Inn), and they all departed prosperously yesterday for Rome. Odo Russell spent two days here on his way thither — we liked him much.

Prinsep and Jones — do you know them? — are in the town. The Storys have passed the summer in the villa opposite, — and no less a lion than dear old Landor is in a house a few steps off. I take care of him — his amiable family having clawed him a little too sharply: so strangely do things come about! I mean his Fiesole "family" — a trifle of wife, sons and daughter — not his English relatives, who are generous and good in every way.

Take any opportunity of telling dear Mrs. Sartoris (however unnecessarily) that I and my wife remember her with the old feeling — I trust she is well and happy to heart's content. Pen is quite well, and rejoicing just now in a Sardinian pony on which he gallops like Puck on a dragonfly's back. My wife's kind regard and best wishes go with those of,

Dear Leighton, yours affectionately ever,

R. Browning.

MRS. TO MISS BROWNING.

October, 1859.

. . . After all, it is not a cruel punishment to have to go to Rome again this winter, though it will be an undesirable expense, and we did wish to keep quiet this winter, — the taste for constant wanderings having passed away as much for me as for Robert. We begin to see that by no possible means can one spend as much money to so small an end — and then we don't work so well, don't live to as much use either for ourselves or others. Isa Blagden bids us observe that we pretend to live at Florence, and are not there much above two months in the year, what with going away for the summer and going away for the winter. It 's too true. It 's the drawback of Italy. To live in one place there is impossible for us, almost just as to live out of Italy at all is impossible for us. It is n't caprice on our part. Siena pleases us very much — the silence and repose have been heavenly things to me, and the country is very pretty —

though no more than pretty — nothing marked or romantic — no mountains, except so far off as to be like a cloud only on clear days — and no water. Pretty dimpled ground, covered with low vineyards, purple hills, not high, with the sunsets clothing them. . . . We shall not leave Florence till November — Robert must see Mr. Landor (his adopted son, Sarianna) settled in his new apartments with Wilson for a duenna. It 's an excellent plan for him and not a bad one for Wilson. . . . Forgive me if Robert has told you this already. Dear darling Robert amuses me by talking of his " gentleness and sweetness." A most courteous and refined gentleman he is, of course, and very affectionate to Robert (as he ought to be), but of self-restraint, he has not a grain, and of suspiciousness, many grains. Wilson will run many risks, and I, for one, would rather not run them. What do you say to dashing down a plate on the floor when you don't like what 's on it? And the contadini at whose house he is lodging now have already been

accused of opening desks. Still upon that occasion (though there was talk of the probability of Mr. Landor's "throat being cut in his sleep") as on other occasions, Robert succeeded in soothing him — and the poor old lion is very quiet on the whole, roaring softly, to beguile the time, in Latin alcaics against his wife and Louis Napoleon. He laughs carnivorously when I tell him that one of these days he will have to write an ode in honor of the Emperor, to please me.

Mrs. Browning writes somewhat later from Rome: —

. . . "We left Mr. Landor in great comfort. I went to see his apartment before it was furnished. Rooms small, but with a lookout into a little garden, quiet and cheerful, and he does n't mind a situation rather out of the way. He pays four pounds ten (English) the month. Wilson has thirty pounds a year for taking care of him — which sounds a good deal, but it is a difficult position. He has excellent, generous, affectionate

impulses — but the impulses of the tiger, every now and then. Nothing coheres in him — either in his opinions, or, I fear, his affections. It is n't age — he is precisely the man of his youth, I must believe. Still, his genius gives him the right of gratitude on all artists at least, and I must say that my Robert has generously paid the debt. Robert always said that he owed more as a writer to Landor than to any contemporary. At present Landor is very fond of him — but I am quite prepared for his turning against us as he has turned against Forster, who has been so devoted for years and years. Only one is n't kind for what one gets by it, or there would n't be much kindness in this world." . . .

Mr. Browning always declared that his wife could impute evil to no one, that she was a living denial of that doctrine of original sin to which her Christianity pledged her; and the great breadth and perfect charity of her views habitually justified the assertion; but she evidently possessed a keen insight into

character, which made her complete suspension of judgment on the subject of spiritualism very difficult to understand.

The spiritualistic coterie had found a satisfactory way of explaining Mr. Browning's antagonistic attitude towards it. He was jealous, it was said, because the spirits on one occasion had dropped a crown on to his wife's head and none on to his own. The first installment of his long answer to this grotesque accusation appears in a letter of Mrs. Browning's, probably written in the course of the winter of 1859–60.

. . . "My brother George sent me a number of the 'National Magazine' with my face in it, after Marshall Wood's medallion. My comfort is that my greatest enemy will not take it to be like me, only that does not go far with the indifferent public: the portrait, I suppose, will have its due weight in arresting the sale of 'Aurora Leigh' from henceforth. You never saw a more determined visage of a strong-minded woman with the neck of a vicious bull. . . . Still, I am surprised,

I own, at the amount of success, and that golden-hearted Robert is in ecstasies about it, far more than if it all related to a book of his own. The form of the story and also something in the philosophy seem to have caught the crowd. As to the poetry by itself, anything good in that repels, rather. I am not so blind as Romney not to perceive this. . . . Give Peni's and my love to the dearest *nonno* (grandfather), whose sublime unselfishness and want of common egotism presents such a contrast to what is here. Tell him I often think of him, and always with touched feeling. (When *he* is eighty-six or ninety-six, nobody will be pained or humbled by the spectacle of an insane self-love resulting from a long life's ungoverned will.) May God bless him! — . . . Robert has made his third bust copied from the antique. He breaks them all up as they are finished — it 's only matter of education. When the power of execution is achieved, he will try at something original. Then reading hurts him; as long as I have known him he has not

been able to read long at a time — he can do it now better than at the beginning. The consequence of which is that an active occupation is salvation to him. . . . Nobody exactly understands him except me, who am in the inside of him and hear him breathe. For the peculiarity of our relation is, that he thinks aloud with me and can't stop himself. . . . I wanted his poems done this winter very much, and here was a bright room with three windows consecrated to his use. But he had a room all last summer, and did nothing. Then, he worked himself out by riding for three or four hours together. There has been little poetry done since last winter, when he did much. He was not inclined to write this winter. The modeling combines body-work and soul-work, and the more tired he has been, and the more his back ached, poor fellow, the more he has exulted and been happy. So I could n't be much in opposition against the sculpture — I could n't in fact at all. He has material for a volume, and will work at it this summer, he says.

"His power is much in advance of 'Strafford,' which is his poorest work of art. Ah, the brain stratifies and matures, even in the pauses of the pen.

"At the same time, his treatment in England affects him, naturally, and for my part I set it down as an infamy of that public — no other word. He says he has told you some things you had not heard, and which I acknowledge I always try to prevent him from repeating to any one. I wonder if he has told you besides (no, I fancy not) that an English lady of rank, an acquaintance of ours (observe that!), asked, the other day, the American minister, whether 'Robert was not an American.' The minister answered, 'Is it possible that *you* ask me this? Why, there is not so poor a village in the United States, where they would not tell you that Robert Browning was an Englishman, and that they were sorry he was not an American.' Very pretty of the American minister, was it not? — and literally true, besides. . . . Ah, dear Sarianna — I don't complain for myself of an

unappreciating public. *I have no reason.* But, just for *that* reason, I complain more about Robert — only he does not hear me complain — to *you* I may say, that the blindness, deafness, and stupidity of the English public to Robert are amazing. Of course Milsand had heard his name — well, the contrary would have been strange. Robert is. All England can't prevent his existence, I suppose. But nobody there, except a small knot of pre-Raffaellite men, pretend to do him justice. Mr. Forster has done the best, — in the press. As a sort of lion, Robert has his range in society — and — for the rest, you should see Chapman's returns! While in America he is a power, a writer, a poet — he is read — he lives in the hearts of the people.

"'Browning readings' here in Boston — 'Browning evenings' there. For the rest, the English hunt lions, too, Sarianna, but their lions are chiefly chosen among lords and railway kings." . . .

We cannot be surprised at Mrs. Browning's desire for a more sustained literary activity on

her husband's part. We learn from his own subsequent correspondence that he too regarded the persevering exercise of his poetic faculty as almost a religious obligation. But it becomes the more apparent that the restlessness under which he was now laboring was its own excuse; and that its causes can have been no mystery even to those "outside" him. The life and climate of Italy were beginning to undermine his strength. We owe it perhaps to the great and sorrowful change, which was then drawing near, that the full power of work returned to him.

During the winter of 1859–60, Mr. Val Prinsep was in Rome. He had gone to Siena with Mr. Burne Jones, bearing an introduction from Rossetti to Mr. Browning and his wife; and the acquaintance with them was renewed in the ensuing months. Mr. Prinsep had acquired much knowledge of the popular, hence picturesque aspects of Roman life, through a French artist long resident in the city; and by the help of the two young men Mr. Browning was also introduced to them.

The assertion that during his married life he never dined away from home must be so far modified, that he sometimes joined Mr. Prinsep and his friend in a Bohemian meal, at an inn near the Porta Pinciana which they much frequented; and he gained in this manner some distinctive experiences which he liked long afterwards to recall. I am again indebted to Mr. Prinsep for a description of some of these.

"The first time he honored us was on an evening when the poet of the quarter of the 'Monte' had announced his intention of coming to challenge a rival poet to a poetical contest. Such contests are, or were, common in Rome. In old times the Monte and the Trastevere, the two great quarters of the eternal city, held their meetings on the Ponte Rotto. The contests were not confined to the effusions of the poetical muse. Sometimes it was a strife between two lute-players, sometimes guitarists would engage, and sometimes mere wrestlers. The rivalry was so keen that the adverse parties finished up with a general

fight. So the Papal Government had forbidden the meetings on the old bridge. But still each quarter had its pet champions, who were wont to meet in private before an appreciative, but less excitable audience, than in olden times.

"Gigi (the host) had furnished a first-rate dinner, and his usual tap of excellent wine. (*Vino del Popolo*, he called it.) The *Osteria* had filled; the combatants were placed opposite each other on either side of a small table on which stood two *mezzi* — long glass bottles holding about a quart apiece. For a moment the two poets eyed each other like two cocks seeking an opportunity to engage. Then through the crowd a stalwart carpenter, a constant attendant of Gigi's, elbowed his way. He leaned over the table with a hand on each shoulder, and in a neatly turned couplet he then addressed the rival bards.

"'You two,' he said, 'for the honor of Rome, must do your best, for there is now listening to you a great Poet from England.'

"Having said this, he bowed to Browning,

and swaggered back to his place in the crowd, amid the applause of the on-lookers.

"It is not necessary to recount how the two Improvisatori poetized, even if I remembered, which I do not.

"On another occasion, when Browning and Story were dining with us, we had a little orchestra (mandolins, two guitars, and a lute), to play to us. The music consisted chiefly of well-known popular airs. While they were playing with great fervor the Hymn to Garibaldi — an air strictly forbidden by the Papal Government, three blows at the door resounded through the *Osteria*. The music stopped in a moment. I saw Gigi was very pale as he walked down the room. There was a short parley at the door. It opened, and a sergeant and two Papal gendarmes marched solemnly up to the counter from which drink was supplied. There was a dead silence while Gigi supplied them with large measures of wine, which the gendarmes leisurely imbibed. Then as solemnly they marched out again, with their heads well in the air, looking neither

to the right nor the left. Most discreet if not incorruptible guardians of the peace! When the door was shut the music began again; but Gigi was so earnest in his protestations, that my friend Browning suggested we should get into carriages and drive to see the Coliseum by moonlight. And so we sallied forth, to the great relief of poor Gigi, to whom it meant, if reported, several months of imprisonment, and complete ruin.

"In after-years Browning frequently recounted with delight this night march.

"'We drove down the Corso in two carriages,' he would say. 'In one were our musicians, in the other we sat. Yes! and the people all asked, "who are these who make all this parade?" At last some one said, "Without doubt these are the fellows who won the lottery," and everybody cried, "Of course these are the lucky men who have won."'"

The two persons whom Mr. Browning saw most, and most intimately, during this and the ensuing winter, were probably Mr. and

Mrs. Story. Allusion has already been made to the opening of the acquaintance at the Baths of Lucca in 1853, to its continuance in Rome in 1853 and 1854, and to the artistic pursuits which then brought the two men into close and frequent contact with each other. These friendly relations were cemented by their children, who were of about the same age; and after Mrs. Browning's death, Miss Browning took her place in the pleasant intercourse which renewed itself whenever their respective visits to Italy and to England again brought the two families together. A no less lasting and truly affectionate intimacy was now also growing up with Mr. Cartwright and his wife — the Cartwrights (of Aynhoe) of whom mention was made in the Siena letter to F. Leighton; and this too was subsequently to include their daughter, now Mrs. Guy Le Strange, and Mr. Browning's sister. I cannot quite ascertain when the poet first knew Mr. Odo Russell, and his mother, Lady William Russell, who was also during this, or at all events the following winter, in Rome;

and whom afterwards in London he regularly visited until her death; but the acquaintance was already entering on the stage in which it would spread as a matter of course through every branch of the family. His first country visit, when he had returned to England, was paid with his son to Woburn Abbey.

We are now indeed fully confronted with one of the great difficulties of Mr. Browning's biography: that of giving a sufficient idea of the growing extent and growing variety of his social relations. It is evident from the fragments of his wife's correspondence that during, as well as after, his married life, he always and everywhere knew every one whom it could interest him to know. These acquaintances constantly ripened into friendliness, friendliness into friendship. They were necessarily often marked by interesting circumstances or distinctive character. To follow them one by one would add not chapters, but volumes, to our history. The time has not yet come at which this could even be undertaken; and any attempt at systematic selec-

tion would create a false impression of the whole. I must therefore be still content to touch upon such passages of Mr. Browning's social experience as lie in the course of a comparatively brief record; leaving all such as are not directly included in it to speak indirectly for themselves.

Mrs. Browning writes again, in 1859: —

"Massimo d' Azeglio came to see us, and talked nobly, with that noble head of his. I was far prouder of his coming than of another personal distinction [1] you will guess at, though I don't pretend to have been insensible to that."

Dr. — afterwards Cardinal — Manning was also among the distinguished or interesting persons whom they knew in Rome.

Another, undated extract might refer to the early summer of 1859 or 1860, when a meeting with the father and sister must have been once more in contemplation.

[1] An invitation to Mr. Browning to dine in company with the young Prince of Wales.

CASA GUIDI.

MY DEAREST SARIANNA, — I am delighted to say that we have arrived, and see our dear Florence — the Queen of Italy — after all. . . . A comfort is that Robert is considered here to be looking better than he ever was known to look — and this notwithstanding the grayness of his beard . . . which indeed is, in my own mind, very becoming to him, the argentine touch giving a character of elevation and thought to the whole physiognomy. This grayness was suddenly developed — let me tell you how. He was in a state of bilious irritability on the morning of his arrival in Rome, from exposure to the sun or some such cause, and in a fit of suicidal impatience shaved away his whole beard . . . whiskers and all!! I *cried* when I saw him, I was so horror-struck. I might have gone into hysterics, and still been reasonable — for no human being was ever so disfigured by so simple an act. Of course I said when I recovered heart and voice, that everything was at an end between him and me if he did n't let it

all grow again directly, and (upon the further advice of his looking-glass) he yielded the point — and the beard grew — but it grew white — which was the just punishment of the gods. Our sins leave their traces.

Well, poor darling Robert won't shock you after all; you can't choose but be satisfied with his looks. M. de Monclar swore to me that he was not changed for the intermediate years. . . .

The family returned, however, to Siena for the summer of 1860, and from thence Mrs. Browning writes to her sister-in-law of her great anxiety concerning her sister Henrietta, Mrs. Surtees Cook,[1] then attacked by a fatal disease.

. . . "There is nothing or little to add to my last account of my precious Henrietta. But, dear, you think the evil less than it is — be sure that the fear is too reasonable. I am of a very hopeful temperament, and I never could go on systematically making the

[1] The name was afterwards changed to Altham.

worst of any case. I bear up here for a few days, and then comes the expectation of a letter, which is hard. I fight with it for Robert's sake, but all the work I put myself to do does not hinder a certain effect. She is confined to her bed almost wholly, and suffers acutely. . . . In fact, I am living from day to day on the merest crumbs of hope — on the daily bread which is very bitter. Of course it has shaken me a good deal, and interfered with the advantages of the summer, but that 's the least. Poor Robert's scheme for me of perfect repose has scarcely been carried out." . . .

This anxiety was heightened during the ensuing winter in Rome by just the circumstance from which some comfort had been expected — the second postal delivery which took place every day; for the hopes and fears which might have found a moment's forgetfulness in the longer absence of news were, as it proved, kept at fever-heat. On one critical occasion the suspense became unbearable, because Mr. Browning, by his wife's desire,

had telegraphed for news, begging for a telegraphic answer. No answer had come, and she felt convinced that the worst had happened, and that the brother to whom the message was addressed could not make up his mind to convey the fact in so abrupt a form. The telegram had been stopped by the authorities, because Mr. Odo Russell had undertaken to forward it, and his position in Rome, besides the known Liberal sympathies of Mr. and Mrs. Browning and himself, had laid it open to political suspicion.

Mrs. Surtees Cook died in the course of the winter. Mr. Browning always believed that the shock and sorrow of this event had shortened his wife's life, though it is also possible that her already lowered vitality increased the dejection into which it plunged her. Her own casual allusions to the state of her health had long marked arrested progress, if not steady decline. We are told, though this may have been a mistake, that active signs of consumption were apparent in her even before the illness of 1859, which was

in a certain sense the beginning of the end. She was completely an invalid, as well as entirely a recluse, during the greater part if not the whole of this last stay in Rome.

She rallied, nevertheless, sufficiently to write to Miss Browning in April, in a tone fully suggestive of normal health and energy.

. . . "In my own opinion he is infinitely handsomer and more attractive than when I saw him first, sixteen years ago. . . . I believe people in general would think the same exactly. As to the modeling, — well, I told you that I grudged a little the time from his own particular art. But it does not do to dishearten him about his modeling. He has given a great deal of time to anatomy with reference to the expression of form, and the clay is only the new medium which takes the place of drawing. Also, Robert is peculiar in his ways of work as a poet. I have struggled a little with him on this point, for I don't think him right; that is to say, it would not be right for me. . . . But Robert waits for an inclination, works by fits and starts; he

can't do otherwise, he says, and his head is full of ideas which are to come out in clay or marble. I yearn for the poems, but he leaves that to me for the present. . . . You will think Robert looking very well when you see him; indeed, you may judge by the photographs meanwhile. You know, Sarianna, how I used to forbid the moustache. I insisted as long as I could, but all artists were against me, and I suppose that the bare upper lip does not harmonize with the beard. He keeps the hair now closer, and the beard is pointed. . . . As to the moony whiteness of the beard, it is beautiful, *I* think, but then I think him all beautiful, and always." . . .

Mr. Browning's old friend, Madame du Quaire,[1] came to Rome in December. She had visited Florence three years before, and I am indebted to her for some details of the spiritualist controversy by which its English colony was at that time divided. She was now a widow, traveling with her brother; and Mr.

[1] Formerly Miss Blackett, and sister of the member for Newcastle.

Browning came whenever he could, to comfort her in her sorrow, and, as she says, discourse of nature, art, the beautiful, and all that "conquers death." He little knew how soon he would need the same comfort for himself. He would also declaim passages from his wife's poems; and when, on one of these occasions, Madame du Quaire had said, as so many persons now say, that she much preferred his poetry to hers, he made this characteristic answer, to be repeated in substance some years afterwards to another friend: "You are wrong — quite wrong — she has genius; I am only a painstaking fellow. Can't you imagine a clever sort of angel who plots and plans, and tries to build up something — he wants to make you see it as he sees it — shows you one point of view, carries you off to another, hammering into your head the thing he wants you to understand; and whilst this bother is going on God Almighty turns you off a little star — that 's the difference between us. The true creative power is hers, not mine."

Mrs. Browning died at Casa Guidi on June

29, 1861, soon after their return to Florence. She had had a return of the bronchial affection to which she was subject; and a new doctor who was called in discovered grave mischief at the lungs, which she herself had long believed to be existent or impending. But the attack was comparatively, indeed actually slight; and an extract from her last letter to Miss Browning, dated June 7, confirms what her family and friends have since asserted, that it was the death of Cavour which gave her the final blow.

. . . "We come home into a cloud here. I can scarcely command voice or hand to name *Cavour*. That great soul which meditated and made Italy has gone to the diviner Country. If tears or blood could have saved him to us, he should have had mine. I feel yet as if I could scarcely comprehend the greatness of the vacancy. A hundred Garibaldis for such a man!"

Her death was signalized by the appearance — this time, I am told, unexpected — of another brilliant comet, which passed so near the earth as to come into contact with it.

CHAPTER XIV.

1861–1863.

Miss Blagden. — Letters from Mr. Browning to Miss Haworth and Mr. Leighton. — His Feeling in regard to Funeral Ceremonies. — Establishment in London. — Plan of Life. — Letter to Madame du Quaire. — Miss Arabel Barrett. — Biarritz. — Letters to Miss Blagden. — Conception of "The Ring and the Book." — Biographical Indiscretion. — New Edition of his Works. — Mr. and Mrs. Procter.

THE friend who was nearest, at all events most helpful, to Mr. Browning in this great and sudden sorrow was Miss Blagden — Isa Blagden, as she was called by all her intimates. Only a passing allusion to her could hitherto find place in this fragmentary record of the poet's life; but the friendship which had long subsisted between her and Mrs. Browning brings her now into closer and more frequent relation to it. She was for many years a centre of English society in Florence;

for her genial, hospitable nature, as well as literary tastes (she wrote one or two novels, I believe not without merit), secured her the acquaintance of many interesting persons, some of whom occasionally made her house their home; and the evenings spent with her at her villa on Bellosguardo live pleasantly in the remembrance of those of our older generation who were permitted to share in them.

She carried the boy away from the house of mourning, and induced his father to spend his nights under her roof, while the last painful duties detained him in Florence. He at least gave her cause to deny, what has been so often affirmed, that great griefs are necessarily silent. She always spoke of this period as her "apocalyptic month," so deeply poetic were the ravings which alternated with the simple human cry of the desolate heart: "I want her, I want her!" But the ear which received these utterances has long been closed in death. The only written outbursts of Mr. Browning's frantic sorrow were addressed, I believe, to his sister, and to the friend, Ma-

dame du Quaire, whose own recent loss most naturally invoked them, and who has since thought best, so far as she was concerned, to destroy the letters in which they were contained. It is enough to know by simple statement that he then suffered as he did. Life conquers Death for most of us; whether or not "nature, art, and beauty" assist in the conquest. It was bound to conquer in Mr. Browning's case: first, through his many-sided vitality; and secondly, through the special motive for living and striving which remained to him in his son. This note is struck in two letters which are given me to publish, written about three weeks after Mrs. Browning's death; and we see also that by this time his manhood was reacting against the blow, and bracing itself with such consoling remembrance as the peace and painlessness of his wife's last moments could afford to him.

FLORENCE, *July* 19, 1861.

DEAR LEIGHTON, — It is like your old kindness to write to me and to say what you

do — I know you feel for me. I can't write about it — but there were many alleviating circumstances that you shall know one day — there seemed no pain, and (what she would have felt most) the knowledge of separation from us was spared her. I find these things a comfort indeed.

I shall go away from Italy for many a year — to Paris, then London for a day or two just to talk with her sister — but if I can see you it will be a great satisfaction. Don't fancy I am "prostrated," I have enough to do for the boy and myself in carrying out her wishes. He is better than one would have thought, and behaves dearly to me. Everybody has been very kind.

Tell dear Mrs. Sartoris that I know her heart and thank her with all mine. After my day or two at London I shall go to some quiet place in France to get right again, and then stay some time at Paris in order to find out leisurely what it will be best to do for Peni — but eventually I shall go to England, I suppose. I don't mean to live with any-

body, even my own family, but to occupy myself thoroughly, seeing dear friends, however, like you. God bless you.

Yours ever affectionately,

ROBERT BROWNING.

The second is addressed to Miss Haworth.

FLORENCE, *July* 20, 1861.

MY DEAR FRIEND, — I well know you feel as you say, for her once and for me now. Isa Blagden, perfect in all kindness to me, will have told you something perhaps — and one day I shall see you and be able to tell you myself as much as I can. The main comfort is that she suffered very little pain, none beside that ordinarily attending the simple attacks of cold and cough she was subject to — had no presentiment of the result whatever, and was consequently spared the misery of knowing she was about to leave us; she was smilingly assuring me she was "better," "quite comfortable — if I would but come to bed," to within a few minutes of the last.

I think I foreboded evil at Rome, certainly from the beginning of the week's illness — but when I reasoned about it, there was no justifying fear — she said on the last evening, "It is merely the old attack, not so severe a one as that of two years ago — there is no doubt I shall soon recover," and we talked over plans for the summer, and next year. I sent the servants away and her maid to bed — so little reason for disquietude did there seem. Through the night she slept heavily, and brokenly — that was the bad sign — but then she would sit up, take her medicine, say unrepeatable things to me, and sleep again. At four o'clock there were symptoms that alarmed me. I called the maid and sent for the doctor. She smiled as I proposed to bathe her feet, "Well, you *are* determined to make an exaggerated case of it!" Then came what my heart will keep till I see her again and longer — the most perfect expression of her love to me within my whole knowledge of her. Always smilingly, happily, and with a face like a girl's — and in a few minutes she

died in my arms; her head on my cheek. These incidents so sustain me that I tell them to her beloved ones as their right: there was no lingering, nor acute pain, nor consciousness of separation, but God took her to himself as you would lift a sleeping child from a dark, uneasy bed into your arms and the light. Thank God. Annunziata thought by her earnest ways with me, happy and smiling as they were, that she must have been aware of our parting's approach — but she was quite conscious, had words at command, and yet did not even speak of Peni, who was in the next room. Her last word was when I asked "How do you feel?" — "Beautiful." You know I have her dearest wishes and interests to attend to *at once* — her child to care for, educate, establish properly; and my own life to fulfill as properly — all just as she would require were she here. I shall leave Italy altogether for years — go to London for a few days' talk with Arabel — then go to my father and begin to try leisurely what will be best for Peni — but no more

"housekeeping" for me, even with my family. I shall grow, still, I hope — but my root is taken and remains.

I know you always loved her, and me too in my degree. I shall always be grateful to those who loved her, and that, I repeat, you did.

She was, and is, lamented with extraordinary demonstrations, if one consider it. The Italians seem to have understood her by an instinct. I have received strange kindness from everybody. Pen is very well — very dear and good, anxious to comfort me as he calls it. He can't know his loss yet. After years, his will be worse than mine — he will want what he never had — that is, for the time when he could be helped by her wisdom, and genius and piety. I *have* had everything and shall not forget.

God bless you, dear friend. I believe I shall set out in a week. Isa goes with me — dear, true heart. You, too, would do what you could for us were you here and your assistance needful. A letter from you came a

day or two before the end — she made me inquire about the Frescobaldi Palace for you — Isa wrote to you in consequence. I shall be heard of at 151 rue de Grenelle St. Germain.

Faithfully and affectionately yours,

ROBERT BROWNING.

The first of these displays even more self-control, it might be thought less feeling, than the second; but it illustrates the reserve which, I believe, habitually characterized Mr. Browning's attitude towards men. His natural, and certainly most complete, confidants were women. At about the end of July he left Florence with his son; also accompanied by Miss Blagden, who traveled with them as far as Paris. She herself must soon have returned to Italy; since he wrote to her in September on the subject of his wife's provisional disinterment,[1] in a manner which shows her to have been on the spot.

[1] Required for the subsequent placing of the monument designed by F. Leighton.

September, 1861.

. . . Isa, may I ask you one favor? Will you, whenever these dreadful preliminaries, the provisional removement, etc., when they are proceeded with — will you do — all you can — suggest every regard to decency and proper feeling to the persons concerned? I have a horror of that man of the graveyard, and needless publicity and exposure — I rely on you, dearest friend of ours, to at least lend us your influence when the time shall come — a word may be invaluable. If there is any show made, or gratification of strangers' curiosity, far better that I had left the turf untouched. These things occur through sheer thoughtlessness, carelessness, not anything worse, but the effect is irreparable. I won't think any more of it — now — at least. . . .

The dread expressed in this letter of any offense to the delicacies of the occasion was too natural to be remarked upon here; but it connects itself with an habitual aversion for the paraphernalia of death, which was a marked

peculiarity of Mr. Browning's nature. He shrank, as his wife had done, from the "earth-side" of the portentous change; but truth compels me to own that her infinite pity had little or no part in his attitude towards it. For him, a body from which the soul had passed held nothing of the person whose earthly vesture it had been. He had no sympathy for the still human tenderness with which so many of us regard the mortal remains of those they have loved, or with the solemn or friendly interest in which that tenderness so often reflects itself in more neutral minds. He would claim all respect for the corpse, but he would turn away from it. Another aspect of this feeling shows itself in a letter to one of his brothers-in-law, Mr. George Moulton-Barrett, in reference to his wife's monument, with which Mr. Barrett had professed himself pleased. His tone is characterized by an almost religious reverence for the memory which that monument enshrines. He nevertheless writes: —

"I hope to see it one day — and, although

I have no kind of concern as to where the old clothes of myself shall be thrown, yet, if my fortune be such, and my survivors be not unduly troubled, I should like them to lie in the place I have retained there. It is no matter, however."

The letter is dated October 19, 1866. He never saw Florence again.

Mr. Browning spent two months with his father and sister at St.-Enogat, near Dinard, from which place the letter to Miss Blagden was written; and then proceeded to London, where his wife's sister, Miss Arabel Barrett, was living. He had declared in his grief that he would never keep house again, and he began his solitary life in lodgings which at his request she had engaged for him; but the discomfort of this arrangement soon wearied him of it; and before many months had passed, he had sent to Florence for his furniture, and settled himself in the house in Warwick Crescent, which possessed, besides other advantages, that of being close to Delamere Terrace, where Miss Barrett had taken up her abode.

This first period of Mr. Browning's widowed life was one of unutterable dreariness, in which the smallest and yet most unconquerable element was the prosaic ugliness of everything which surrounded him. It was fifteen years since he had spent a winter in England; he had never spent one in London. There had been nothing to break for him the transition from the stately beauty of Florence to the impressions and associations of the Harrow and Edgware Roads, and of Paddington Green. He might have escaped this neighborhood by way of Westbourne Terrace; but his walks constantly led him in an easterly direction; and whether in an unconscious hugging of his chains, or, as was more probable, from the desire to save time, he would drag his aching heart and reluctant body through the sordidness or the squalor of this short cut, rather than seek the pleasanter thoroughfares which were open to him. Even the prettiness of Warwick Crescent was neutralized for him by the atmosphere of low or ugly life which encompassed it on almost every side. His haunt-

ing dream was one day to have done with it all; to have fulfilled his mission with his son, educated him, launched him in a suitable career, and to go back to sunshine and beauty again. He learned by degrees to regard London as a home; as the only fitting centre for the varied energies which were reviving in him; to feel pride and pleasure in its increasingly picturesque character. He even learned to appreciate the outlook from his house — that "second from the bridge" of which so curious a presentment had entered into one of the poems of the "Men and Women"[1] — in spite of the refuse of humanity which would sometimes yell at the street corner, or fling stones at his plate-glass. But all this had to come; and it is only fair to admit that twenty-nine years ago the beauties of which I have spoken were in great measure to come also. He could not then in any mood have exclaimed, as he did to a friend two or three years ago: "Shall we not have a pretty London if things go on in this way?" They

[1] *How it strikes a Contemporary.*

were driving on the Kensington side of Hyde Park.

The paternal duty, which, so much against his inclination, had established Mr. Browning in England, would in every case have lain very near to his conscience and to his heart; but it especially urged itself upon them through the absence of any injunction concerning it on his wife's part. No farewell words of hers had commended their child to his father's love and care; and though he may, for the moment, have imputed this fact to unconsciousness of her approaching death, his deeper insight soon construed the silence into an expression of trust, more binding upon him than the most earnest exacted promise could have been. The growing boy's education occupied a considerable part of his time and thoughts, for he had determined not to send him to school, but, as far as possible, himself prepare him for the University. He must also, in some degree, have supervised his recreations. He had therefore, for the present, little leisure for social distractions,

and probably at first very little inclination for them. His plan of life and duty, and the sense of responsibility attendant on it, had been communicated to Madame du Quaire in a letter written also from St.-Enogat.

M. Chauvin, St.-Enogat près Dinard,
Ile et Vilaine, *August* 17, 1861.

Dear Madame du Quaire, — I got your note on Sunday afternoon, but found myself unable to call on you as I had been intending to do. Next morning I left for this place (near St.-Malo, but I give what they say is the proper address). I want first to beg you to forgive my withholding so long your little oval mirror — it is safe in Paris, and I am vexed at having stupidly forgotten to bring it when I tried to see you. I shall stay here till the autumn sets in, then return to Paris for a few days — the first of which will be the best, if I can see you in the course of it — afterward, I settle in London.

When I meant to pass the winter in Paris, I hoped, the first thing almost, to be near you

— it now seems to me, however, that the best course for the Boy is to begin a good English education at once. I shall take quiet lodgings (somewhere near Kensington Gardens, I rather think) and get a Tutor. I want, if I can (according to my present very imperfect knowledge) to get the poor little fellow fit for the University without passing through a Public School. I, myself, could never have done much by either process, but he is made differently — imitates and emulates and all that. How I should be grateful if you would help me by any word that should occur to you! I may easily do wrong, begin ill, through too much anxiety — perhaps, however, all may be easier than seems to me just now.

I shall have a great comfort in talking to you — this writing is stiff, ineffectual work. Pen is very well, cheerful now — has his little horse here. The place is singularly unspoiled, fresh and picturesque, and lovely to heart's content. I wish you were here! — and if you knew exactly what such a wish means,

you would need no assuring in addition that I am

Yours affectionately and gratefully ever,

ROBERT BROWNING.

The person of whom he saw most was his sister-in-law, whom he visited, I believe, every evening. Miss Barrett had been a favorite sister of Mrs. Browning's, and this constituted a sufficient title to her husband's affection. But she was also a woman to be loved for her own sake. Deeply religious and very charitable, she devoted herself to visiting the poor — a form of philanthropy which was then neither so widespread nor so fashionable as it has since become; and she founded, in 1850, the first Training School or Refuge which had ever existed for destitute little girls. It need hardly be added that Mr. and Miss Browning coöperated in the work. The little poem, "The Twins," republished in 1855 in "Men and Women," was first printed (with Mrs. Browning's "Plea for the Ragged Schools of London") for the benefit of this Refuge. It

was in Miss Barrett's company that Mr. Browning used to attend the church of Mr. Thomas Jones, to a volume of whose "Sermons and Addresses" he wrote a short introduction in 1884.

On February 15, 1862, he writes again to Miss Blagden: —

February 15, 1862.

. . . While I write, my heart is sore for a great calamity just befallen poor Rossetti, which I only heard of last night — his wife, who had been, as an invalid, in the habit of taking laudanum, swallowed an overdose — was found by the poor fellow on his return from the workingmen's class in the evening, under the effects of it — help was called in, the stomach-pump used; but she died in the night, about a week ago. There has hardly been a day when I have not thought, "If I can, to-morrow, I will go and see him, and thank him for his book, and return his sister's poems." Poor, dear fellow! . . .

. . . Have I not written a long letter, for me who hate the sight of a pen now, and see

a pile of unanswered things on the table before me? — on this very table. Do you tell me in turn all about yourself. I shall be interested in the minutest thing you put down. What sort of weather is it? You cannot but be better at your new villa than in the large solitary one. There I am again, going up the winding way to it, and seeing the herbs in red flower, and the butterflies on the top of the wall under the olive-trees! Once more, good-by. . . .

The hatred of writing of which he here speaks refers probably to the class of letters which he had lately been called upon to answer, and which must have been painful in proportion to the kindness by which they were inspired. But it returned to him many years later, in simple weariness of the mental and mechanical act, and with such force that he would often answer an unimportant note in person, rather than make the seemingly much smaller exertion of doing so with his pen. It was the more remarkable that, with the rarest

exceptions, he replied to every letter which came to him.

The late summer of the former year had been entirely unrefreshing, in spite of his acknowledgment of the charms of St.-Enogat. There was more distraction and more soothing in the stay at Cambo and Biarritz, which was chosen for the holiday of 1862. Years afterwards, when the thought of Italy carried with it less longing and even more pain, Mr. Browning would speak of a visit to the Pyrenees, if not a residence among them, as one of the restful possibilities of his later and freer life. He wrote to Miss Blagden : —

BIARRITZ, MAISON GASTONBIDE, *September* 19, 1862.

. . . I stayed a month at green pleasant little Cambo, and then came here from pure inability to go elsewhere — St.-Jean de Luz, on which I had reckoned, being still fuller of Spaniards who profit by the new railway. This place is crammed with gay people, of whom I see nothing but their outsides. The sea, sands, and view of the Spanish coast and mountains are superb, and this house is on the

town's outskirts. I stay till the end of the month, then go to Paris, and then get my neck back into the old collar again. Pen has managed to get more enjoyment out of his holiday than seemed at first likely — there was a nice French family at Cambo with whom he fraternized, riding with the son and escorting the daughter in her walks. His red cheeks look as they should. For me, I have got on by having a great read at Euripides — the one book I brought with me, besides attending to my own matters, my new poem that is about to be; and of which the whole is pretty well in my head — the Roman murder story you know.

. . . How I yearn, yearn for Italy at the close of my life! . . .

The "Roman murder story" was, I need hardly say, to become "The Ring and the Book."

It has often been told, though with curious confusion as regards the date, how Mr. Browning picked up the original parchment-bound record of the Franceschini case on a

stall of the Piazza San Lorenzo. We read in the first section of his own work that he plunged instantly into the study of this record; that he had mastered it by the end of the day; and that he then stepped out on to the terrace of his house amid the sultry blackness and silent lightnings of the June night, as the adjacent church of San Felice sent forth its chants, and voices buzzed in the street below, — and saw the tragedy as a living picture unfold itself before him. These were his last days at Casa Guidi. It was four years before he definitely began the work. The idea of converting the story into a poem cannot even have occurred to him for some little time, since he offered it for prose treatment to Miss Ogle, the author of "A Lost Love;" and for poetic use, I am almost certain, to one of his leading contemporaries. It was this slow process of incubation which gave so much force and distinctness to his ultimate presentment of the characters; though it infused a large measure of personal imagination, and, as we shall see, of personal reminiscence, into their historical truth.

Before "The Ring and the Book" was actually begun, "Dramatis Personæ" and "In a Balcony" were to be completed. Their production had been delayed during Mrs. Browning's lifetime, and necessarily interrupted by her death; but we hear of the work as progressing steadily during this summer of 1862.

A painful subject of correspondence had been also for some time engaging Mr. Browning's thoughts and pen. A letter to Miss Blagden, written January 19, 1863, is so expressive of his continued attitude towards the questions involved that, in spite of its strong language, his family advise its publication. The name of the person referred to will alone be omitted.

. . . "Ever since I set foot in England I have been pestered with applications for leave to write the Life of my wife — I have refused — and there an end. I have last week received two communications from friends, inclosing the letters of a certain . . . of . . ., asking them for details of life and letters, for a biography he is engaged in — adding, that

he 'has secured the correspondence with her old friend . . .' Think of this beast working away at this, not deeming my feelings or those of her family worthy of notice — and meaning to print letters written years and years ago, on the most intimate and personal subjects, to an 'old friend' — which, at the poor . . . [friend's] death fell into the hands of a complete stranger, who at once wanted to print them, but desisted through Ba's earnest expostulation enforced by my own threat to take law proceedings — as fortunately letters are copyright. I find this woman died last year, and her son writes to me this morning that . . . got them from him as autographs merely — he will try and get them back. . . ., evidently a blackguard, got my letter, which gave him his deserts, on Saturday — no answer yet — if none comes, I shall be forced to advertise in the 'Times,' and obtain an injunction. But what I suffer in feeling the hands of these blackguards (for I forgot to say another man has been making similar applications to friends), what I undergo with

their paws in my very bowels, you can guess, and God knows! No friend, of course, would ever give up the letters — if anybody ever is forced to do that which *she* would have writhed under — if it ever *were* necessary, why, *I* should be forced to do it, and, with any good to her memory and fame, my own pain in the attempt would be turned into joy — I should *do* it at whatever cost: but it is not only unnecessary but absurdly useless — and, indeed, it shall not be done if I can stop the scamp's knavery along with his breath.

"I am going to reprint the Greek Christian Poets and another essay — nothing that ought to be published shall be kept back — and this she certainly intended to correct, augment, and reproduce — but *I* open the doubled-up paper! Warn any one you may think needs the warning of the utter distress in which I should be placed were this scoundrel, or any other of the sort, to baffle me and bring out the letters — I can't prevent fools from uttering their folly upon her life, as they do on every other subject, but the law protects property —

as these letters are. Only last week, or so, the Bishop of Exeter stopped the publication of an announced 'Life' — containing extracts from his correspondence — and so I shall do." . . .

Mr. Browning only resented the exactions of modern biography in the same degree as most other right-minded persons; but there was, to his thinking, something especially ungenerous in dragging to light any immature or unconsidered utterance which the writer's later judgment would have disclaimed. Early work was always for him included in this category; and here it was possible to disagree with him; since the promise of genius has a legitimate interest from which no distance from its subsequent fulfillment can detract. But there could be no disagreement as to the rights and decencies involved in the present case; and, as we hear no more of the letters to Mr. . . ., we may perhaps assume that their intending publisher was acting in ignorance, but did not wish to act in defiance, of Mr. Browning's feeling in the matter.

In the course of this year, 1863, Mr. Brown-

ing brought out, through Chapman and Hall, the still well-known and well-loved three-volume edition of his works, including "Sordello," but again excluding "Pauline." A selection of his poems which appeared somewhat earlier, if we may judge by the preface, dated November, 1862, deserves mention as a tribute to friendship. The volume had been prepared by John Forster and Bryan Waller Procter (Barry Cornwall), "two friends," as the preface states, "who from the first appearance of 'Paracelsus' have regarded its writer as among the few great poets of the century." Mr. Browning had long before signalized his feeling for Barry Cornwall by the dedication of "Colombe's Birthday." He discharged the present debt to Mr. Procter, if such there was, by the attentions which he rendered to his infirm old age. For many years he visited him every Sunday, in spite of a deafness ultimately so complete that it was only possible to converse with him in writing. These visits were afterwards, at her urgent request, continued to Mr. Procter's widow.

CHAPTER XV.

1863–1869.

Pornic. — "James Lee's Wife." — Meeting at Mr. F. Palgrave's. — Letters to Miss Blagden. — His own Estimate of his Work. — His Father's Illness and Death; Miss Browning. — Le Croisic. — Academic Honors; Letter to the Master of Balliol. — Death of Miss Barrett. — Audierne. — Uniform Edition of his Works. — His rising Fame. — "Dramatis Personæ." — "The Ring and the Book;" Character of Pompilia.

THE most constant contributions to Mr. Browning's history are supplied during the next eight or nine years by extracts from his letters to Miss Blagden. Our next will be dated from Ste.-Marie, near Pornic, where he and his family again spent their holiday in 1864 and 1865. Some idea of the life he led there is given at the close of a letter to Frederic Leighton, August 17, 1863, in which he says: —

"I live upon milk and fruit, bathe daily, do

a good morning's work, read a little with Pen and somewhat more by myself, go to bed early, and get up earlyish — rather liking it all."

This mention of a diet of milk and fruit recalls a favorite habit of Mr. Browning's: that of almost renouncing animal food whenever he went abroad. It was partly promoted by the inferior quality of foreign meat, and showed no sign of specially agreeing with him, at all events in his later years, when he habitually returned to England looking thinner and more haggard than before he left it. But the change was always congenial to his taste.

A fuller picture of these simple, peaceful, and poetic Pornic days comes to us through Miss Blagden, August 18: —

. . . "This is a wild little place in Brittany, something like that village where we stayed last year. Close to the sea — a hamlet of a dozen houses, perfectly lonely — one may walk on the edge of the low rocks by the sea for miles. Our house is the Mayor's, large enough, clean and bare. If I could, I would stay just as I am for many a day. I feel out

of the very earth sometimes as I sit here at the window; with the little church, a field, a few houses, and the sea. On a weekday there is nobody in the village, plenty of haystacks, cows, and fowls; all our butter, eggs, milk, are produced in the farmhouse. Such a soft sea, and such a mournful wind!

"I wrote a poem yesterday of 120 lines, and mean to keep writing whether I like it or not." . . .

That "window" was the "Doorway" in "James Lee's Wife." The sea, the field, and the fig-tree were visible from it.

A long interval in the correspondence, at all events so far as we are concerned, carries us to the December of 1864, and then Mr. Browning wrote: —

. . . "On the other hand, I feel such comfort and delight in doing the best I can with my own object of life, poetry — which, I think, I never could have seen the good of before, that it shows me I have taken the root I *did* take *well*. I hope to do much more yet — and that the flower of it will be put into Her

hand somehow. I really have great opportunities and advantages — on the whole, almost unprecedented ones — I think, no other disturbances and cares than those I am most grateful for being allowed to have." . . .

One of our very few written reminiscences of Mr. Browning's social life refers to this year, 1864, and to the evening, February 12, on which he signed his will in the presence of Mr. Francis Palgrave and Alfred Tennyson. It is inscribed in the diary of Mr. Thomas Richmond, then chaplain to St. George's Hospital; and Mr. Reginald Palgrave has kindly procured me a copy of it. A brilliant party had met at dinner at the house of Mr. F. Palgrave, York Gate, Regent's Park; Mr. Richmond, having fulfilled a prior engagement, had joined it later. "There were, in order," he says, "round the dinner-table (dinner being over), Gifford Palgrave, Tennyson, Dr. John Ogle, Sir Francis H. Doyle, Frank Palgrave, W. E. Gladstone, Browning, Sir John Simeon, Monsignor Patterson, Woolner, and Reginald Palgrave."

Mr. Richmond closes his entry by saying he will never forget that evening. The names of those whom it had brought together, almost all to be sooner or later numbered among the poet's friends, were indeed enough to stamp it as worthy of recollection. One or two characteristic utterances of Mr. Browning are, however, the only ones which it seems advisable to repeat here. The conversation having turned on the celebration of the Shakespeare ter-centenary, he said: "Here we are called upon to acknowledge Shakespeare, we who have him in our very bones and blood, our very selves. The very recognition of Shakespeare's merits by the committee reminds me of nothing so apt as an illustration as the decree of the Directoire that men might acknowledge God."

Among the subjects discussed was the advisability of making schoolboys write English verses as well as Latin and Greek. "Woolner and Sir Francis Doyle were for this; Gladstone and Browning against it."

Work had now found its fitting place in

the poet's life. It was no longer the overflow of an irresistible productive energy; it was the deliberate direction of that energy towards an appointed end. We hear something of his own feeling concerning this in a letter of August, 1865, again from Ste.-Marie, and called forth by some gossip concerning him which Miss Blagden had connected with his then growing fame.

. . . "I suppose that what you call 'my fame within these four years' comes from a little of this gossiping and going about, and showing myself to be alive: and so indeed some folks say — but I hardly think it: for remember I was uninterruptedly (almost) in London from the time I published 'Paracelsus' till I ended that string of plays with 'Luria' — and I used to go out then, and see far more of merely literary people, critics, etc., than I do now — but what came of it? There were always a few people who had a certain opinion of my poems, but nobody cared to speak what he thought, or the things printed twenty-five years ago would not have

waited so long for a good word; but at last a new set of men arrive who don't mind the conventionalities of ignoring one and seeing everything in another. Chapman says 'the new orders come from Oxford and Cambridge,' and all my new cultivators are young men; more than that, I observe that some of my old friends don't like at all the irruption of outsiders who rescue me from their sober and private approval, and take those words out of their mouths 'which they always meant to say' and never did. When there gets to be a general feeling of this kind, that there must be something in the works of an author, the reviews are obliged to notice him, such notice as it is — but what poor work, even when doing its best! I mean poor in the failure to give a general notion of the whole works; not a particular one of such and such points therein. As I begun, so I shall end — taking my own course, pleasing myself or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing God.

"As I never did otherwise, I never had

any fear as to what I did going ultimately to the bad — hence in collected editions I always reprinted everything, smallest and greatest. Do you ever see, by the way, the numbers of the selection which Moxons publish? They are exclusively poems omitted in that other selection by Forster; it seems little use sending them to you, but when they are completed, if they give me a few copies, you shall have one if you like. Just before I left London, Macmillan was anxious to print a third selection for his Golden Treasury, which should of course be different from either — but *three* seem too absurd. There, enough of me.

"I certainly will do my utmost to make the most of my poor self before I die; for one reason, that I may help old Pen the better; I was much struck by the kind ways and interest shown in me by the Oxford undergraduates — those introduced to me by Jowett. I am sure they would be the more helpful to my son. So, good luck to my great venture, the murder-poem, which I do hope will strike you and all good lovers of mine." . . .

We cannot wonder at the touch of bitterness with which Mr. Browning dwells on the long neglect which he had sustained; but it is at first sight difficult to reconcile this high positive estimate of the value of his poetry with the relative depreciation of his own poetic genius which constantly marks his attitude towards that of his wife. The facts are, however, quite compatible. He regarded Mrs. Browning's genius as greater, because more spontaneous, than his own: owing less to life and its opportunities; but he judged his own work as the more important, because of the larger knowledge of life which had entered into its production. He was wrong in the first terms of his comparison: for he underrated the creative, hence spontaneous element in his own nature, while claiming primarily the position of an observant thinker; and he overrated the amount of creativeness implied by the poetry of his wife. He failed to see that, given her intellectual endowments, and the lyric gift, the characteristics of her genius were due to circumstances as much as those of

his own. Actual life is not the only source of poetic inspiration, though it may, perhaps, be the best. Mrs. Browning as a poet became what she was, not in spite of her long seclusion, but by help of it. A touching paragraph, bearing upon this subject, is dated October, 1865.

. . . "Another thing. I have just been making a selection of Ba's poems which is wanted — how I have done it, I can hardly say — it is one dear delight to know that the work of her goes on more effectually than ever — her books are more and more read — certainly, sold. A new edition of 'Aurora Leigh' is completely exhausted within this year." . . .

Of the thing next dearest to his memory, his Florentine home, he had written in the January of this year: —

. . . "Yes, Florence will never be *my* Florence again. To build over or beside Poggio seems barbarous and inexcusable. The Fiesole side don't matter. Are they going to pull the old walls down, or any part of them, I want to

know? Why can't they keep the old city as a nucleus and build round and round it, as many rings of houses as they please — framing the picture as deeply as they please? Is Casa Guidi to be turned into any Public Office? I should think that its natural destination. If I am at liberty to flee away one day, it will not be to Florence, I dare say. As old Philipson said to me once of Jerusalem — 'No, I don't want to go there — I can see it in my head.' . . . Well, good-by, dearest Isa. I have been for a few minutes — nay, a good many — so really with you in Florence that it would be no wonder if you heard my steps up the lane to your house." . . .

Part of a letter written in the September of 1865 from Ste.-Marie may be interesting as referring to the legend of Pornic included in "Dramatis Personæ."

. . . "I suppose my 'poem' which you say brings me and Pornic together in your mind, is the one about the poor girl — if so, 'fancy' (as I hear you say) they have pulled down the church since I arrived last month — there are

only the shell-like, roofless walls left, for a few weeks more; it was very old — built on a natural base of rock — small enough, to be sure — so they build a smart new one behind it, and down goes this; just as if they could not have pitched down their brick and stucco farther away, and left the old place for the fishermen — so here — the church is even more picturesque — and certain old Norman ornaments, capitals of pillars and the like, which we left erect in the doorway, are at this moment in a heap of rubbish by the roadside. The people here are good, stupid, and dirty, without a touch of the sense of picturesqueness in their clodpolls." . . .

The little record continues through 1866.

February 19, 1866.

. . . I go out a great deal; but have enjoyed nothing so much as a dinner last week with Tennyson, who, with his wife and one son, is staying in town for a few weeks — and she is just what she was and always will be — very sweet and dear: he seems to me better

than ever. I met him at a large party on Saturday — also Carlyle, whom I never met at a "drum" before. . . . Pen is drawing our owl — a bird that is the light of our house, for his tameness and engaging ways. . . .

May 19, 1866.

. . . My father has been unwell — he is better and will go into the country the moment the east winds allow — for in Paris, as here, there is a razor wrapped up in the flannel of sunshine. I hope to hear presently from my sister, and will tell you if a letter comes: he is eighty-five, almost — you see! otherwise his wonderful constitution would keep me from inordinate apprehension. His mind is absolutely as I always remember it — and the other day when I wanted some information about a point of mediæval history, he wrote a regular bookful of notes and extracts thereabout. . . .

June 20, 1866.

My dearest Isa, I was telegraphed for to Paris last week, and arrived time enough to

pass twenty-four hours more with my father: he died on the 14th — quite exhausted by internal hemorrhage, which would have overcome a man of thirty. He retained all his faculties to the last — was utterly indifferent to death — asking with surprise what it was we were affected about since he was perfectly happy? — and kept his own strange sweetness of soul to the end. Nearly his last words to me, as I was fanning him, were, "I am so afraid that I fatigue you, dear"! this, while his sufferings were great; for the strength of his constitution seemed impossible to be subdued. He wanted three weeks exactly to complete his eighty-fifth year. So passed away this good, unworldly, kind-hearted, religious man, whose powers natural and acquired would so easily have made him a notable man, had he known what vanity or ambition or the love of money or social influence meant. As it is, he was known by half-a-dozen friends. He was worthy of being Ba's father — out of the whole world, only he, so far as my experience goes. She loved him — and *he* said, very recently,

while gazing at her portrait, that only that picture had put into his head that there might be such a thing as the worship of the images of saints. My sister will come and live with me henceforth. You see what she loses. All her life has been spent in caring for my mother, and seventeen years after that, my father. You may be sure she does not rave and rend hair like people who have plenty to atone for in the past; but she loses very much. I returned to London last night. . . .

During his hurried journey to Paris, Mr. Browning was mentally blessing the Emperor for having abolished the system of passports, and thus enabled him to reach his father's bedside in time. His early Italian journeys had brought him some vexatious experience of the old order of things. Once, at Venice, he had been mistaken for a well-known Liberal, Dr. Bowring, and found it almost impossible to get his passport *visé;* and, on another occasion, it aroused suspicion by being "too good;" though in what sense I do not quite remember.

Miss Browning did come to live with her brother, and was thenceforward his inseparable companion. Her presence with him must therefore be understood wherever I have had no special reason for mentioning it.

They tried Dinard for the remainder of the summer; but finding it unsuitable, proceeded by St.-Malo to Le Croisic, the little seaside town of southeastern Brittany which two of Mr. Browning's poems have since rendered famous.

The following extract has no date: —

LE CROISIC, LOIRE INFÉRIEURE.

. . . We all found Dinard unsuitable, and after staying a few days at St.-Malo resolved to try this place, and well for us, since it serves our purpose capitally. . . . We are in the most delicious and peculiar old house I ever occupied, the oldest in the town — plenty of great rooms — nearly as much space as in Villa Alberti. The little town and surrounding country are wild and primitive, even a trifle beyond Pornic, perhaps. Close by is

Batz, a village where the men dress in white from head to foot, with baggy breeches, and great black flap hats; opposite is Guérande, the old capital of Bretagne: you have read about it in Balzac's "Béatrix" — and other interesting places are near. The sea is all round our peninsula, and on the whole I expect we shall like it very much. . . .

Later.

. . . We enjoyed Croisic increasingly to the last — spite of three weeks' vile weather, in striking contrast to the golden months at Pornic last year. I often went to Guérande — once Sarianna and I walked from it in two hours and something under — nine miles; though from our house, straight over the sands and sea, it is not half the distance. . . .

In 1867 Mr. Browning received his first and greatest academic honors. The M. A. degree by diploma, of the University of Oxford, was conferred on him in June;[1] and in

[1] "Not a lower degree than that of D. C. L., but a much higher honor, hardly given since Dr. Johnson's time except to kings and royal personages." . . . So the Keeper of the Archives wrote to Mr. Browning at the time.

the month of October he was made honorary Fellow of Balliol College. Dr. Jowett allows me to publish the, as he terms it, very characteristic letter in which he acknowledged the distinction. Dr. Scott, afterwards Dean of Rochester, was then Master of Balliol.

19 Warwick Crescent, *October* 21, 1867.

Dear Dr. Scott, — I am altogether unable to say how I feel as to the fact you communicate to me. I must know more intimately than you can how little worthy I am of such an honor — you can hardly set the value of that honor, you who give, as I who take it.

Indeed, there *are* both "duties and emoluments" attached to this position, — duties of deep and lasting gratitude, and emoluments through which I shall be wealthy my life long. I have at least loved learning and the learned, and there needed no recognition of my love on their part to warrant my professing myself, as I do, dear Dr. Scott, yours ever most faithfully, Robert Browning.

In the following year he received and declined the virtual offer of the Lord Rectorship of the University of St. Andrews, rendered vacant by the death of Mr. J. S. Mill.

He returned with his sister to Le Croisic for the summer of 1867.

In June, 1868, Miss Arabel Barrett died, of a rheumatic affection of the heart. As did her sister seven years before, she passed away in Mr. Browning's arms. He wrote the event to Miss Blagden as soon as it occurred, describing also a curious circumstance attendant on it.

19th June, 1868.

. . . You know I am not superstitious — here is a note I made in a book, Tuesday, July 21, 1863. "Arabel told me yesterday that she had been much agitated by a dream which happened the night before, Sunday, July 19. She saw Her and asked 'When shall I be with you?' the reply was, 'Dearest, in five years,' whereupon Arabella woke. She knew in her dream that it was not to the living she spoke." In five years, within a

month of their completion — I had forgotten the date of the dream, and supposed it was only three years ago, and that two had still to run. Only a coincidence, but noticeable. . . .

In August he writes again from Audierne, Finisterre (Brittany).

. . . "You never heard of this place, I dare say. After staying a few days at Paris we started for Rennes — reached Cannes and halted a little — thence made for Auray, where we made excursions to Carnac, Lokmariaker, and Ste.-Anne d'Auray; all very interesting of their kind; then saw Brest, Morlaix, St.-Pol de Léon, and the seaport Roscoff — our intended bathing place — it was full of folk, however, and otherwise impracticable, so we had nothing for it, but to *rebrousser chemin* and get to the southwest again. At Quimper we heard (for a second time) that Audierne would suit us exactly, and to it we came — happily, for 'suit' it certainly does. Look on the map for the most westerly point of Bretagne — and of the main-

land of Europe — there is niched Audierne, a delightful quite unspoiled little fishing-town, with the open ocean in front, and beautiful woods, hills and dales, meadows and lanes behind and around — sprinkled here and there with villages each with its fine old church. Sarianna and I have just returned from a four hours' walk, in the course of which we visited a town, Pont Croix, with a beautiful cathedral-like building amid the cluster of clean bright Breton houses — and a little farther is another church, 'Notre Dame de Comfort,' with only a hovel or two round it, worth the journey from England to see; we are therefore very well off — at an inn, I should say, with singularly good, kind, and liberal people, so have no cares for the moment. May you be doing as well! The weather has been most propitious, and to-day is perfect to a wish. We bathe, but somewhat ingloriously, in a smooth creek of mill-pond quietude (there being no cabins on the bay itself), unlike the great rushing waves of Croisic — the water is much colder." . . .

The tribute contained in this letter to the merits of le Père Batifoulier and his wife would not, I think, be indorsed by the few other English travelers who have stayed at their inn. The writer's own genial and kindly spirit no doubt partly elicited, and still more supplied, the qualities he saw in them.

The six-volume, so long known as "uniform," edition of Mr. Browning's works was brought out in the autumn of this year by Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co.; practically Mr. George Murray Smith, who was to be thenceforward his exclusive publisher and increasingly valued friend. In the winter months appeared the first two volumes (to be followed in the ensuing spring by the third and fourth) of "The Ring and the Book."

With "The Ring and the Book" Mr. Browning attained the full recognition of his genius. The "Athenæum" spoke of it as the *opus magnum* of the generation; not merely beyond all parallel the supremest poetic achievement of the time, but the

most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England had produced since the days of Shakespeare. His popularity was yet to come, so also the widespread reading of his hitherto neglected poems; but henceforth whatever he published was sure of ready acceptance, of just, if not always enthusiastic, appreciation. The ground had not been gained at a single leap. A passage in another letter to Miss Blagden shows that, when "The Ring and the Book" appeared, a high place was already awaiting it outside those higher academic circles in which its author's position was secured.

. . . "I want to get done with my poem. Booksellers are making me pretty offers for it. One sent to propose, last week, to publish it at his risk, giving me *all* the profits, and pay me the whole in advance — 'for the incidental advantages of my name' — the R. B. who for six months once did not sell one copy of the poems! I ask £200 for the sheets to America, and shall get it." . . .

His presence in England had doubtless

stimulated the public interest in his productions; and we may fairly credit "Dramatis Personæ" with having finally awakened his countrymen of all classes to the fact that a great creative power had arisen among them. "The Ring and the Book" and "Dramatis Personæ" cannot indeed be dissociated in what was the culminating moment in the author's poetic life, even more than the zenith of his literary career. In their expression of all that constituted the wide range and the characteristic quality of his genius, they at once support and supplement each other. But a fact of more distinctive biographical interest connects itself exclusively with the later work.

We cannot read the emotional passages of "The Ring and the Book" without hearing in them a voice which is not Mr. Browning's own: an echo, not of his past, but from it. The remembrance of that past must have accompanied him through every stage of the great work. Its subject had come to him in the last days of his greatest happiness. It

had lived with him, though in the background of consciousness, through those of his keenest sorrow. It was his refuge in that after-time, in which a subsiding grief often leaves a deeper sense of isolation. He knew the joy with which his wife would have witnessed the diligent performance of this his self-imposed task. The beautiful dedication contained in the first and last books was only a matter of course. But Mrs. Browning's spiritual presence on this occasion was more than a presiding memory of the heart. I am convinced that it entered largely into the conception of Pompilia, and, so far as this depended on it, the character of the whole work. In the outward course of her history, Mr. Browning proceeded strictly on the ground of fact. His dramatic conscience would not have allowed it otherwise. He had read the record of the case, as he has been heard to say, fully eight times over before converting it into the substance of his poem; and the form in which he finally cast it was that which recommended itself to him as true — which, within

certain limits, *was* true. The testimony of those who watched by Pompilia's death-bed is almost conclusive as to the absence of any criminal motive to her flight, or criminal circumstance connected with it. Its time proved itself to have been that of her impending, perhaps newly expected motherhood, and may have had some reference to this fact. But the real Pompilia was a simple child, who lived in bodily terror of her husband, and had made repeated efforts to escape from him. Unless my memory much deceives me, her physical condition plays no part in the historical defense of her flight. If it appeared there at all, it was as a merely practical incentive to her striving to place herself in safety. The sudden rapturous sense of maternity which, in the poetic rendering of the case, becomes her impulse to self-prctection, was beyond her age and her culture; it was not suggested by the facts; and, what is more striking, it was not a natural development of Mr. Browning's imagination concerning them.

The parental instinct was among the weakest in his nature — a fact which renders the more conspicuous his devotion to his own son; it finds little or no expression in his work. The apotheosis of motherhood which he puts forth through the aged priest in "Ivàn Ivànovitch" was due to the poetic necessity of lifting a ghastly human punishment into the sphere of Divine retribution. Even in the advancing years which soften the father into the grandfather, the essential quality of early childhood was not that which appealed to him. He would admire its flower-like beauty, but not linger over it. He had no special emotion for its helplessness. When he was attracted by a child it was through the evidence of something not only distinct from, but opposed to this. "It is the soul" (I see) "in that speck of a body," he said, not many years ago, of a tiny boy — now too big for it to be desirable that I should mention his name, but whose mother, if she reads this, will know to whom I allude — who had delighted him by an act of intelligent grace

which seemed beyond his years. The ingenuously unbounded maternal pride, the almost luscious maternal sentiment, of Pompilia's dying moments can only associate themselves in our mind with Mrs. Browning's personal utterances, and some notable passages in "Casa Guidi Windows" and "Aurora Leigh." Even the exalted fervor of the invocation to Caponsacchi, its blending of spiritual ecstasy with half-realized earthly emotion, has, I think, no parallel in her husband's work.

Pompilia bears still, unmistakably, the stamp of her author's genius. Only he could have imagined her peculiar form of consciousness; her childlike, wondering, yet subtle perception of the anomalies of life. He has raised the woman in her from the typical to the individual by this distinguishing touch of his supreme originality; and thus infused into her character a haunting pathos which renders it to many readers the most exquisite in the whole range of his creations. For others, at the same time it fails in the impressiveness

because it lacks the reality which habitually marks them.

So much, however, is certain: Mr. Browning would never have accepted this "murder story" as the subject of a poem, if he could not in some sense have made it poetical. It was only in an idealized Pompilia that the material for such a process could be found. We owe it, therefore, to the one departure from his usual mode of dramatic conception, that the poet's masterpiece has been produced. I know no other instance of what can be even mistaken for reflected inspiration in the whole range of his work, the given passages in "Pauline" excepted.

The postscript of a letter to Frederic Leighton, written so far back as October 17, 1864, is interesting in its connection with the preliminary stages of this great undertaking.

"A favor, if you have time for it. Go into the church St. Lorenzo in Lucina in the Corso — and look attentively at it — so as to describe it to me on your return. The general arrangement of the building, if with a nave

— pillars or not — the number of altars, and any particularity there may be — over the High Altar is a famous Crucifixion by Guido. It will be of great use to me. I don't care about the *outside*."

CHAPTER XVI.

1869–1873.

Lord Dufferin ; " Helen's Tower." — Scotland ; Visit to Lady Ashburton. — Letters to Miss Blagden. — St.-Aubin ; The Franco-Prussian War. — " Hervé Riel." — Letter to Mr. G. M. Smith. — " Balaustion's Adventure ;" " Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau." — " Fifine at the Fair." — Mistaken Theories of Mr. Browning's Work. — St.-Aubin ; "Red Cotton Nightcap Country."

From 1869 to 1871 Mr. Browning published nothing; but in April, 1870, he wrote the sonnet called " Helen's Tower," a beautiful tribute to the memory of Helen, mother of Lord Dufferin, suggested by the memorial tower which her son was erecting to her on his estate at Clandeboye. The sonnet appeared in 1883, in the " Pall Mall Gazette," and was reprinted in 1886, in " Sonnets of the Century," edited by Mr. Sharp ; and again in the fifth part of the Browning Society's

"Papers;" but it is still, I think, sufficiently little known to justify its reproduction.

Who hears of Helen's Tower may dream perchance
How the Greek Beauty from the Scæan Gate
Gazed on old friends unanimous in hate,
Death-doom'd because of her fair countenance.

Hearts would leap otherwise at thy advance,
Lady, to whom this Tower is consecrate!
Like hers, thy face once made all eyes elate,
Yet, unlike hers, was bless'd by every glance.

The Tower of Hate is outworn, far and strange;
A transitory shame of long ago;
It dies into the sand from which it sprang;
But thine, Love's rock-built Tower, shall fear no change.
God's self laid stable earth's foundations so,
When all the morning-stars together sang.

April 26, 1870.

Lord Dufferin is a warm admirer of Mr. Browning's genius. He also held him in strong personal regard.

In the summer of 1869 the poet, with his sister and son, changed the manner of his holiday, by joining Mr. Story and his family in a tour in Scotland, and a visit to Louisa, Lady Ashburton, at Loch Luichart Lodge;

but in the August of 1870 he was again in the primitive atmosphere of a French fishing village, though one which had little to recommend it but the society of a friend; it was M. Milsand's St.-Aubin. He had written, February 24, to Miss Blagden, under the one inspiration which naturally recurred in his correspondence with her.

. . . "So you, too, think of Naples for an eventual resting-place! Yes, that is the proper basking-ground for 'bright and aged snakes.' Florence would be irritating, and, on the whole, insufferable — yet I never hear of any one going thither but my heart is twitched. There is a good, charming little singing German lady, Miss Regan, who told me the other day that she was just about revisiting her aunt, Madame Sabatier, whom you may know, or know of — and I felt as if I should immensely like to glide, for a long summer day, through the streets and between the old stone-walls — unseen come and unheard go — perhaps by some miracle, I shall do so — and look up at Villa Brichieri as

Arnold's Gypsy-Scholar gave one wistful look at 'the line of festal light in Christ Church Hall,' before he went to sleep in some forgotten grange. . . . I am so glad I can be comfortable in your comfort. I fancy exactly how you feel and see how you live: it *is* the Villa Geddes of old days, I find. I well remember the fine view from the upper room — that looking down the steep hill, by the side of which runs the road you describe — that path was always my preferred walk, for its shortness (abruptness) and the fine old wall to your left (from the Villa) which is overgrown with weeds and wild flowers — violets and ground-ivy, I remember. Oh, me! to find myself some late sunshiny Sunday afternoon, with my face turned to Florence — 'ten minutes to the gate, ten minutes *home!*' I think I should fairly end it all on the spot." . . .

He writes again from St.-Aubin, August 19, 1870: —

Dearest Isa, — Your letter came prosperously to this little wild place, where we

have been, Sarianna and myself, just a week. Milsand lives in a cottage with a nice bit of garden, two steps off, and we occupy another of the most primitive kind on the seashore — which shore is a good sandy stretch for miles and miles on either side. I don't think we were ever quite so thoroughly washed by the sea air from all quarters as here — the weather is fine, and we do well enough. The sadness of the war and its consequences go far to paralyze all our pleasure, however. . . .

Well, you are at Siena — one of the places I love best to remember. You are returned — or I would ask you to tell me how the Villa Alberti wears, and if the fig-tree behind the house is green and strong yet. I have a pen-and-ink drawing of it, dated and signed the last day Ba was ever there — "my fig-tree" — she used to sit under it, reading and writing. Nine years, or ten rather, since then! Poor old Landor's oak, too, and his cottage, ought not to be forgotten. Exactly opposite this house — just over the way of the water — shines every night the lighthouse of Hâvre —

a place I know well, and love very moderately: but it always gives me a thrill as I see afar, *exactly* a particular spot which I was at along with her. At this moment, I see the white streak of the phare in the sun, from the window where I write and I *think*. . . . Milsand went to Paris last week, just before we arrived, to transport his valuables to a safer place than his house, which is near the fortifications. He is filled with as much despondency as can be — while the old dear and perfect kindness remains. I never knew or shall know his like among men. . . .

The war did more than sadden Mr. and Miss Browning's visit to St.-Aubin; it opposed unlooked-for difficulties to their return home. They had remained, unconscious of the impending danger, till Sedan had been taken, the Emperor's downfall proclaimed, and the country suddenly placed in a stage of siege. One morning M. Milsand came to them in anxious haste, and insisted on their starting that very day. An order, he said, had been

issued that no native should leave the country, and it only needed some unusually thick-headed Maire for Mr. Browning to be arrested as a runaway Frenchman or a Prussian spy. The usual passenger-boats from Calais and Boulogne no longer ran; but there was, he believed, a chance of their finding one at Hâvre. They acted on this warning, and discovered its wisdom in the various hindrances which they found on their way. Everywhere the horses had been requisitioned for the war. The boat on which they had relied to take them down the river to Caen had been stopped that very morning; and when they reached the railroad they were told that the Prussians would be at the other end before night. At last they arrived at Honfleur, where they found an English vessel which was about to convey cattle to Southampton; and in this, setting out at midnight, they made their passage to England.

Some words addressed to Miss Blagden, written, I believe, in 1871, once more strike a touching familiar note.

. . . "But *no*, dearest Isa. The simple

truth is that *she* was the poet, and I the clever person by comparison — remember her limited experience of all kinds, and what she made of it. Remember, on the other hand, how my uninterrupted health and strength and practice with the world have helped me." . . .

"Balaustion's Adventure" and "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau" were published, respectively, in August and December, 1871. They had been preceded in the March of the same year by a ballad, "Hervé Riel," afterwards reprinted in the "Pacchiarotto" volume, and which Mr. Browning now sold to the "Cornhill Magazine" for the benefit of the French sufferers by the war.

The circumstances of this little transaction, unique in Mr. Browning's experience, are set forth in the following letter: —.

February 4, 1871.

My dear Smith, — I want to give something to the people in Paris, and can afford so very little just now that I am forced upon an expedient. Will you buy of me that poem which poor Simeon praised in a letter you

saw, and which I like better than most things I have done of late? Buy — I mean — the right of printing it in the "Pall Mall" and, if you please, the "Cornhill" also — the copyright remaining with me. You remember you wanted to print it in the "Cornhill," and I was obstinate: there is hardly any occasion on which I should be otherwise, if the printing any poem of mine in a magazine were purely for my own sake: so, any liberality you exercise will not be drawn into a precedent against you. I fancy this is a case in which one may handsomely puff one's own ware, and I venture to call my verses good for once. I send them to you directly, because expedition will render whatever I contribute more valuable: for when you make up your mind as to how liberally I shall be enabled to give, you must send me a cheque and I will send the same as the "Product of a Poem" — so that your light will shine deservedly. Now, begin proceedings by reading the poem to Mrs. Smith — by whose judgment I will cheerfully be bound; and, with her approval, second my

endeavor as best you can. Would — for the love of France — that this were a "Song of a Wren" — then should the guineas equal the lines; as it is, do what you safely may for the song of a Robin — Browning — who is yours very truly, into the bargain.

P. S. The copy is so clear and careful that you might, with a good Reader, print it on Monday, nor need my help for corrections: I shall however be always at home, and ready at a moment's notice: return the copy, if you please, as I promised it to my son long ago.

Mr. Smith gave him 100 guineas as the price of the poem.

He wrote concerning the two longer poems, first probably at the close of this year, and again in January, 1872, to Miss Blagden.

. . . "By this time you have got my little book (Hohenstiel), and seen for yourself whether I make the best or the worst of the case. I think, in the main, he meant to do what I say, and, but for weakness — grown more apparent in his last years than formerly

— would have done what I say he did not.[1] I thought badly of him at the beginning of his career, *et pour cause:* better afterward, on the strength of the promises he made, and gave indications of intending to redeem. I think him very weak in the last miserable year. At his worst I prefer him to Thiers's best. I am told my little thing is succeeding — sold 1,400 in the first five days, and before any notice appeared. I remember that the year I made the little rough sketch in Rome, 1860, my account for the last six months with Chapman was — *nil*, not one copy disposed of. . . .

. . . "I am glad you like what the editor of the 'Edinburgh' calls my eulogium on the second empire — which it is not, any more than what another wiseacre affirms it to be, 'a scandalous attack on the old constant friend of England' — it is just what I imagine the man might, if he pleased, say for himself."

Mr. Browning continues : —

"Spite of my ailments and bewailments,

[1] This phrase is a little misleading.

I have just all but finished another poem of quite another kind, which shall amuse you in the spring, I hope! I don't go sound asleep, at all events. 'Balaustion' — the second edition is in the press, I think I told you. 2,500 in five months is a good sale for the likes of me. But I met Henry Taylor (of Artevelde) two days ago at dinner, and he said he had never gained anything by his books, which surely is a shame — I mean, if no buyers mean no readers." . . .

"Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau" was written in Scotland, where Mr. Browning was the guest of Mr. Ernest Benzon: having left his sister to the care of M. and Madame Milsand at St.-Aubin. The ailment he speaks of consisted, I believe, of a severe cold. Another of the occurrences of 1871 was Mr. Browning's election as Life Governor of the London University.

A passage from a letter dated March 30, 1872, bears striking testimony to the constant warmth of his affections.

. . . "The misfortune, which I did not

guess when I accepted the invitation, is that I shall lose some of the last days of Milsand, who has been here for the last month: no words can express the love I have for him, you know. He is increasingly precious to me. . . . Waring came back the other day, after thirty years' absence, the same as ever — nearly. He has been Prime Minister at New Zealand for a year and a half, but gets tired, and returns home with a poem." [1]

This is my last extract from the correspondence with Miss Blagden. Her death closed it altogether within the year.

It is difficult to infer from letters, however intimate, the dominant state of the writer's mind: most of all to do so in Mr. Browning's case, from such passages of his correspondence as circumstances allow me to quote. Letters written in intimacy, and to the same friend, often express a recurrent mood, a revived set of associations, which for the moment destroys the habitual balance of feeling. The same effect is sometimes produced in personal inter-

[1] *Ranolf and Amohia.*

course; and the more varied the life, the more versatile the nature, the more readily in either case will a lately unused spring of emotion well up at the passing touch. We may even fancy we read into the letters of 1870 that eerie, haunting sadness of a cherished memory from which, in spite of ourselves, life is bearing us away. We may also err in so doing. But literary creation, patiently carried on through a given period, is usually a fair reflection of the general moral and mental conditions under which it has taken place; and it would be hard to imagine from Mr. Browning's work during these last ten years that any but gracious influences had been operating upon his genius, any more disturbing element than the sense of privation and loss had entered into his inner life.

Some leaven of bitterness must, nevertheless, have been working within him, or he could never have produced that piece of perplexing cynicism, "Fifine at the Fair" — the poem referred to as in progress in a letter to Miss Blagden, and which appeared in the

spring of 1872. The disturbing cause had been also of long standing; for the deeper reactive processes of Mr. Browning's nature were as slow as its more superficial response was swift; and while "Dramatis Personæ," "The Ring and the Book," and even "Balaustion's Adventure" represented the gradually perfected substance of his poetic imagination, "Fifine at the Fair" was as the froth thrown up by it during the prolonged simmering which was to leave it clear. The work displays the iridescent brightness as well as the occasional impurity of this frothlike character. Beauty and ugliness are, indeed, almost inseparable in the moral impression which it leaves upon us. The author has put forth a plea for self-indulgence with a much slighter attempt at dramatic disguise than his special pleadings generally assume; and while allowing circumstances to expose the sophistry of the position, and punish its attendant act, he does not sufficiently condemn it. But, in identifying himself for the moment with the conception of a Don Juan, he has infused into

it a tenderness and a poetry with which the true type had very little in common, and which retard its dramatic development. Those who knew Mr. Browning, or who thoroughly know his work, may censure, regret, fail to understand, "Fifine at the Fair;" they will never in any important sense misconstrue it.

But it has been so misconstrued by an intelligent and not unsympathetic critic; and his construction may be indorsed by other persons in the present, and still more in the future, in whom the elements of a truer judgment are wanting. It seems, therefore, best to protest at once against the misjudgment, though in so doing I am claiming for it an attention which it may not seem to deserve. I allude to Mr. Mortimer's "Note on Browning" in the "Scottish Art Review" for December, 1889. This note contains a summary of Mr. Browning's teaching, which it resolves into the moral equivalent of the doctrine of the conservation of force. Mr. Mortimer assumes for the purpose of his comparison that the exercise of force means necessarily moving

on; and according to him Mr. Browning prescribes action at any price, even that of defying the restrictions of moral law. He thus, we are told, blames the lovers in "The Statue and the Bust" for their failure to carry out what was an immoral intention; and, in the person of his "Don Juan," defends a husband's claim to relieve the fixity of conjugal affection by varied adventure in the world of temporary loves: the result being "the negation of that convention under which we habitually view life, but which for some reason or other breaks down when we have to face the problems of a Goethe, a Shelley, a Byron, or a Browning."

Mr. Mortimer's generalization does not apply to the "Statue and the Bust," since Mr. Browning has made it perfectly clear that, in this case, the intended act is postponed without reference to its morality, and simply in consequence of a weakness of will, which would have been as paralyzing to a good purpose as it was to the bad one: but it is not without superficial sanction in "Fifine at the

Fair;" and the part which the author allowed himself to play in it did him an injustice only to be measured by the inference which it has been made to support. There could be no mistake more ludicrous, were it less regrettable, than that of classing Mr. Browning, on moral grounds, with Byron or Shelley; even in the case of Goethe the analogy breaks down. The evidence of the foregoing pages has rendered all protest superfluous. But the suggested moral resemblance to the two English poets receives a striking comment in a fact of Mr. Browning's life which falls practically into the present period of our history: his withdrawal from Shelley of the devotion of more than forty years on account of an act of heartlessness towards his first wife which he held to have been proved against him.

The sweet and the bitter lay, indeed, very close to each other at the sources of Mr. Browning's inspiration. Both proceeded, in great measure, from his spiritual allegiance to the past — that past by which it was impossible that he should linger, but which he could

not yet leave behind. The present came to him with friendly greeting. He was unconsciously, perhaps inevitably, unjust to what it brought. The injustice reacted upon himself, and developed by degrees into the cynical mood of fancy which became manifest in "Fifine at the Fair."

It is true that, in the light of this explanation, we see an effect very unlike its cause; but the chemistry of human emotion is like that of natural life. It will often form a compound in which neither of its constituents can be recognized. This perverse poem was the last as well as the first manifestation of an ungenial mood of Mr. Browning's mind. A slight exception may be made for some passages in "Red Cotton Nightcap Country," and for one of the poems of the "Pacchiarotto" volume; but otherwise no sign of moral or mental disturbance betrays itself in his subsequent work. The past and the present gradually assumed for him a more just relation to each other. He learned to meet life as it offered itself to him with a more

frank recognition of its good gifts, a more grateful response to them. He grew happier, hence more genial, as the years advanced.

It was not without misgiving that Mr. Browning published "Fifine at the Fair;" but many years were to pass before he realized the kind of criticism to which it had exposed him. The belief conveyed in the letter to Miss Blagden that what proceeds from a genuine inspiration is justified by it, combined with the indifference to public opinion which had been engendered in him by its long neglect, made him slow to anticipate the results of external judgment, even where he was in some degree prepared to indorse them. For his value as a poet, it was best so.

The August of 1872 and of 1873 again found him with his sister at St.-Aubin, and the earlier visit was an important one: since it supplied him with the materials of his next work, of which Miss Annie Thackeray, there also for a few days, suggested the title. The tragic drama which forms the subject of Mr. Browning's poem had been in great part

enacted in the vicinity of St.-Aubin ; and the case of disputed inheritance to which it had given rise was pending at that moment in the tribunals of Caen. The prevailing impression left on Miss Thackeray's mind by this primitive district was, she declared, that of white cotton nightcaps (the habitual headgear of the Normandy peasants). She engaged to write a story called "White Cotton Nightcap Country;" and Mr. Browning's quick sense of both contrast and analogy inspired the introduction of this emblem of repose into his own picture of that peaceful, prosaic existence, and of the ghastly spiritual conflict to which it had served as background. He employed a good deal of perhaps strained ingenuity in the opening pages of the work, in making the white cap foreshadow the red, itself the symbol of liberty, and only indirectly connected with tragic events; and he would, I think, have emphasized the irony of circumstance in a manner more characteristic of himself, if he had laid his stress on the remoteness from "the madding crowd," and repeated

Miss Thackeray's title. There can, however, be no doubt that his poetic imagination, no less than his human insight, was amply vindicated by his treatment of the story.

On leaving St.-Aubin he spent a month at Fontainebleau, in a house situated on the outskirts of the forest; and here his principal indoor occupation was reading the Greek dramatists, especially Æschylus, to whom he had returned with revived interest and curiosity. "Red Cotton Nightcap Country" was not begun till his return to London in the later autumn. It was published in the early summer of 1873.

CHAPTER XVII.

1873–1878.

London Life. — Love of Music. — Miss Egerton-Smith. — Periodical Nervous Exhaustion. — Mers ; "Aristophanes' Apology." — "Agamemnon." — "The Inn Album." — "Pacchiarotto and other Poems." — Visits to Oxford and Cambridge. — Letters to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald. — St. Andrews ; Letter from Professor Knight. — In the Savoyard Mountains. — Death of Miss Egerton-Smith. — "La Saisiaz ;" "The Two Poets of Croisic." — Selections from his Works.

THE period on which we have now entered, covering roughly the ten or twelve years which followed the publication of "The Ring and the Book," was the fullest in Mr. Browning's life; it was that in which the varied claims made by it on his moral, and above all his physical energies, found in him the fullest power of response. He could rise early and go to bed late — this, however, never from choice; and occupy every hour of the day

with work or pleasure, in a manner which his friends recalled regretfully in later years, when of two or three engagements which ought to have divided his afternoon, a single one — perhaps only the most formally pressing — could be fulfilled. Soon after his final return to England, while he still lived in comparative seclusion, certain habits of friendly intercourse, often superficial, but always binding, had rooted themselves in his life. London society, as I have also implied, opened itself to him in ever-widening circles, or, as it would be truer to say, drew him more and more deeply into its whirl; and even before the mellowing kindness of his nature had infused warmth into the least substantial of his social relations, the imaginative curiosity of the poet — for a while the natural ambition of the man — found satisfaction in it. For a short time, indeed, he entered into the fashionable routine of country-house visiting. Besides the instances I have already given, and many others which I may have forgotten, he was heard of, during the earlier part of this decade, as the guest of

Lord Carnarvon at Highclere Castle, of Lord Shrewsbury at Alton Towers, of Lord Brownlow and his mother, Lady Marian Alford, at Belton and Ashridge. Somewhat later, he stayed with Mr. and Lady Alice Gaisford at a house they temporarily occupied on the Sussex downs; with Mr. Cholmondeley at Condover, and, much more recently, at Aynhoe Park with Mr. and Mrs. Cartwright. Kind and pressing, and in themselves very tempting invitations of this nature came to him until the end of his life; but he very soon made a practice of declining them, because their acceptance could only renew for him the fatigues of the London season, while the tantalizing beauty and repose of the country lay before his eyes; but such visits, while they continued, were one of the necessary social experiences which brought their grist to his mill.

And now, in addition to the large social tribute which he received, and had to pay, he was drinking in all the enjoyment, and incurring all the fatigue which the London musical world could create for him. In Italy he had

found the natural home of the other arts. The one poem, "Old Pictures in Florence," is sufficiently eloquent of long communion with the old masters and their works; and if his history in Florence and Rome had been written in his own letters instead of those of his wife, they must have held many reminiscences of galleries and studios, and of the places in which pictures are bought and sold. But his love for music was as certainly starved as the delight in painting and sculpture was nourished; and it had now grown into a passion, from the indulgence of which he derived, as he always declared, some of the most beneficent influences of his life. It would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that he attended every important concert of the season, whether isolated or given in a course. There was no engagement possible or actual, which did not yield to the discovery of its clashing with the day and hour fixed for one of these. His frequent companion on such occasions was Miss Egerton-Smith.

Miss Smith became only known to Mr.

Browning's general acquaintance through the dedicatory "A. E. S." of "La Saisiaz;" but she was, at the time of her death, one of his oldest women friends. He first met her as a young woman in Florence when she was visiting there; and the love for and proficiency in music soon asserted itself as a bond of sympathy between them. They did not, however, see much of each other till he had finally left Italy, and she also had made her home in London. She there led a secluded life, although free from family ties, and enjoying a large income derived from the ownership of an important provincial paper. Mr. Browning was one of the very few persons whose society she cared to cultivate; and for many years the common musical interest took the practical, and for both of them convenient form, of their going to concerts together. After her death, in the autumn of 1877, he almost mechanically renounced all the musical entertainments to which she had so regularly accompanied him. The special motive and special facility were gone — she had been wont to call for him in

her carriage; the habit was broken; there would have been first pain, and afterwards an unwelcome exertion in renewing it. Time was also beginning to sap his strength, while society, and perhaps friendship, were making increasing claims upon it. It may have been for this same reason that music after a time seemed to pass out of his life altogether. Yet its almost sudden eclipse was striking in the case of one who not only had been so deeply susceptible to its emotional influences, so conversant with its scientific construction and its multitudinous forms, but who was acknowledged as "musical" by those who best know the subtle and complex meaning of that often misused term.

Mr. Browning could do all that I have said during the period through which we are now following him; but he could not quite do it with impunity. Each winter brought its searching attack of cold and cough; each summer reduced him to the state of nervous prostration or physical apathy of which I have already spoken, and which at once rendered

change imperative, and the exertion of seeking it almost intolerable. His health and spirits rebounded at the first draught of foreign air; the first breath from an English cliff or moor might have had the same result. But the remembrance of this fact never nerved him to the preliminary effort. The conviction renewed itself with the close of every season, that the best thing which could happen to him would be to be left quiet at home; and his disinclination to face even the idea of moving equally hampered his sister in her endeavor to make timely arrangements for their change of abode.

This special craving for rest helped to limit the area from which their summer resort could be chosen. It precluded all idea of a *pension*-life, hence of any much-frequented spot in Switzerland or Germany. It was tacitly understood that the shortening days were not to be passed in England. Italy did not yet associate itself with the possibilities of a moderately short absence; the resources of the northern French coast were becoming ex-

hausted; and as the August of 1874 approached, the question of how and where this and the following months were to be spent was, perhaps, more than ever a perplexing one. It was now Miss Smith who became the means of its solution. She had more than once joined Mr. and Miss Browning at the seaside. She was anxious this year to do so again, and she suggested for their meeting a quiet spot called Mers, almost adjoining the fashionable Tréport, but distinct from it. It was agreed that they should try it; and the experiment, which they had no reason to regret, opened also in some degree a way out of future difficulties. Mers was young, and had the defect of its quality. Only one desirable house was to be found there; and the plan of joint residence became converted into one of joint housekeeping, in which Mr. and Miss Browning at first refused to concur, but which worked so well that it was renewed in the three ensuing summers: Miss Smith retaining the initiative in the choice of place, her friends the right of veto upon it. They stayed again

together in 1875 at Villers, on the coast of Normandy; in 1876 at the Isle of Arran; in 1877 at a house called La Saisiaz — Savoyard for the sun — in the Salève district near Geneva.

The autumn months of 1874 were marked for Mr. Browning by an important piece of work: the production of "Aristophanes' Apology." It was far advanced when he returned to London in November, after a visit to Antwerp, where his son was studying art under M. Heyermans; and its much later appearance must have been intended to give breathing time to the readers of "Red Cotton Nightcap Country." Mr. Browning subsequently admitted that he sometimes, during these years, allowed active literary occupation to interfere too much with the good which his holiday might have done him; but the temptations to literary activity were this time too great to be withstood. The house occupied by him at Mers (Maison Robert) was the last of the straggling village, and stood on a rising cliff. In front was the open sea; beyond

it a long stretch of down; everywhere comparative solitude. Here, in uninterrupted quiet, and in a room devoted to his use, Mr. Browning would work till the afternoon was advanced, and then set forth on a long walk over the cliffs, often in the face of a wind which, as he wrote of it at the time, he could lean against as if it were a wall. And during this time he was living, not only in his work, but with the man who had inspired it. The image of Aristophanes, in the half-shamed insolence, the disordered majesty, in which he is placed before the reader's mind, was present to him from the first moment in which the Defense was conceived. What was still more interesting, he could see him, hear him, think with him, speak for him, and still inevitably condemn him. No such instance of always ingenious, and sometimes earnest pleading foredoomed to complete discomfiture occurs in Mr. Browning's works.

To Aristophanes he gave the dramatic sympathy which one lover of life can extend to another, though that other unduly extol its

lower forms. To Euripides he brought the palm of the higher truth, to his work the tribute of the more pathetic human emotion. Even these for a moment ministered to the greatness of Aristophanes, in the tear shed by him to the memory of his rival, in the hour of his own triumph; and we may be quite sure that when Mr. Browning depicted that scene, and again when he translated the great tragedian's words, his own eyes were dimmed. Large tears fell from them, and emotion choked his voice, when he first read aloud the transcript of the "Herakles" to a friend, who was often privileged to hear him.

Mr. Browning's deep feeling for the humanities of Greek literature, and his almost passionate love for the language, contrasted strongly with his refusal to regard even the first of Greek writers as models of literary style. The pretensions raised for them on this ground were inconceivable to him; and his translation of the "Agamemnon," published 1877, was partly made, I am convinced, for the pleasure of exposing these claims, and

of rebuking them. His preface to the transcript gives evidence of this. The glee with which he pointed to it when it first appeared was no less significant.

At Villers, in 1875, he only corrected the proofs of "The Inn Album" for publication in November. When the party started for the Isle of Arran, in the autumn of 1876, the "Pacchiarotto" volume had already appeared.

When Mr. Browning discontinued his short-lived habit of visiting away from home, he made an exception in favor of the Universities. His occasional visits to Oxford and Cambridge were maintained till the very end of his life, with increasing frequency in the former case; and the days spent at Balliol and Trinity afforded him as unmixed a pleasure as was compatible with the interruption of his daily habits, and with a system of hospitality which would detain him for many hours at table. A vivid picture of them is given in two letters, dated January 20 and March 10, 1877, and addressed to one of his constant

correspondents, Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, of Shalstone Manor, Buckingham.

DEAR FRIEND, — I have your letter of yesterday, and thank you all I can for its goodness and graciousness to me unworthy. . . . I return on Thursday — the hospitality of our Master being not easy to set aside. But to begin with the beginning: the passage from London to Oxford was exceptionally prosperous — the train was full of men my friends. I was welcomed on arriving by a Fellow who installed me in my rooms — then came the pleasant meeting with Jowett, who at once took me to tea with his other guests, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop of London, Dean of Westminster, the Airlies, Cardwells, male and female. Then came the banquet (I inclose you the plan, having no doubt that you will recognize the name of many an acquaintance: please return it) — and, the dinner done, speechifying set in vigorously. The Archbishop proposed the standing *Floreat domus de Balliolo* — to which the Master

made due and amusing answer, himself giving the health of the Primate. Lord Coleridge, in a silvery speech, drank to the University, responded to by the Vice-Chancellor. I forget who proposed the visitors — the Bishop of London, perhaps Lord Cardwell. Professor Smith gave the two Houses of Parliament, — Jowett, the Clergy, coupling with it the name of your friend Mr. Rogers — on whom he showered every kind of praise, and Mr. Rogers returned thanks very characteristically and pleasantly. Lord Lansdowne drank to the Bar (Mr. Bowen), Lord Camperdown to — I really forget what: Mr. Green to Literature and Science, delivering a most undeserved eulogium on myself, with a more rightly directed one on Arnold, Swinburne, and the old pride of Balliol, Clough: this was cleverly and almost touchingly answered by dear Mat Arnold. Then the Dean of Westminster gave the Fellows and Scholars — and then — twelve o'clock struck. We were, counting from the time of preliminary assemblage, six hours and a half engaged: *fully* five and a half nailed to

our chairs at the table: but the whole thing was brilliant, genial, and suggestive of many and various thoughts to me — and there was a warmth, earnestness, and yet refinement about it which I never experienced in any previous public dinner. Next morning I breakfasted with Jowett and his guests, found that return would be difficult: while as the young men were to return on Friday there would be no opposition to my departure on Thursday. The morning was dismal with rain, but after luncheon there was a chance of getting a little air, and I walked for more than two hours, then heard service in New Coll. — then dinner again: my room had been prepared in the Master's house. So, on Thursday, after yet another breakfast, I left by the noonday train, after all sorts of kindly offices from the Master. . . . No reporters were suffered to be present — the account in yesterday's "Times" was furnished by one or more of the guests; it is quite correct as far as it goes. There were, I find, certain little paragraphs which must have been furnished

by "guessers:" Swinburne, set down as present, was absent through his father's illness: the Cardinal also excused himself as did the Bishop of Salisbury and others. . . .

Ever yours,

R. Browning.

The second letter, from Cambridge, was short and written in haste, at the moment of Mr. Browning's departure; but it tells the same tale of general kindness and attention. Engagements for no less than six meals had absorbed the first day of the visit. The occasion was that of Professor Joachim's investiture with his Doctor's degree; and Mr. Browning declares that this ceremony, the concert given by the great violinist, and his society, were "each and all" worth the trouble of the journey. He himself was to receive the Cambridge degree of LL. D. in 1879, the Oxford D. C. L. in 1882. A passage in another letter addressed to the same friend refers probably to a practical reminiscence of "Red Cotton Nightcap Country," which en-

livened the latter experience, and which Mrs. Fitz-Gerald had witnessed with disapprobation.[1]

. . . You are far too hard on the very harmless drolleries of the young men, licensed as they are, moreover, by immemorial usage. Indeed there used to be a regularly appointed jester, *Filius Terræ* he was called, whose business it was to jibe and jeer at the honored ones, by way of reminder that all human glories are merely gilded bubbles and must not be fancied metal. You saw that the Reverend Dons escaped no more than the poor poet — or rather I should say than myself the poor poet — for I was pleased to observe with what attention they listened to the Newdigate. . . .

Ever affectionately yours,

R. Browning.

In 1875 he was unanimously nominated by

[1] An actual red cotton nightcap had been made to flutter down on to the poet's head.

its Independent Club to the office of Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow; and in 1877 he again received the offer of the Rectorship of St. Andrews, couched in very urgent and flattering terms. A letter addressed to him from this University by Dr. William Knight, Professor of Moral Philosophy there, which I have his permission to publish, bears witness to what had long been and was always to remain a prominent fact of Mr. Browning's literary career: his great influence on the minds of the rising generation of his countrymen.

THE UNIVERSITY, ST. ANDREWS, N. B.,
November 17, 1877.

MY DEAR SIR, — . . . The students of this University, in which I have the honor to hold office, have nominated you as their Lord Rector; and intend unanimously, I am told, to elect you to that office on Thursday.

I believe that hitherto no Rector has been chosen by the undivided suffrage of any Scottish University. They have heard, however, that you are unable to accept the office;

and your committee, who were deeply disappointed to learn this afternoon of the way in which you have been informed of their intentions, are, I believe, writing to you on the subject. So keen is their regret that they intend respectfully to wait upon you on Tuesday morning by deputation, and ask if you cannot waive your difficulties in deference to their enthusiasm, and allow them to proceed with your election.

Their suffrage may, I think, be regarded as one sign of how the thoughtful youth of Scotland estimate the work you have done in the world of letters.

And permit me to say that while these Rectorial elections in the other Universities have frequently turned on local questions, or been inspired by political partisanship, St. Andrews has honorably sought to choose men distinguished for literary eminence, and to make the Rectorship a tribute at once of intellectual and moral esteem.

May I add that when the *perfervidum ingenium* of our northern race takes the form

not of youthful hero-worship, but of loyal admiration and respectful homage, it is a very genuine affair. In the present instance I may say it is no mere outburst of young undisciplined enthusiasm, but an honest expression of intellectual and moral indebtedness, the genuine and distinct tribute of many minds that have been touched to some higher issues by what you have taught them. They do not presume to speak of your place in English literature. They merely tell you by this proffered honor (the highest in their power to bestow), how they have felt your influence over them.

My own obligations to you, and to the author of "Aurora Leigh," are such that of them "silence is golden."

Yours ever gratefully,

WILLIAM KNIGHT.

Mr. Browning was deeply touched and gratified by these professions of esteem. He persisted, nevertheless, in his refusal. The Glasgow nomination had also been declined by him.

On August 17, 1877, he wrote to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald from La Saisiaz: —

"How lovely is this place in its solitude and seclusion, with its trees and shrubs and flowers, and above all its live mountain stream which supplies three fountains, and two delightful baths, a marvel of delicate delight framed in with trees — I bathe there twice a day — and then what wonderful views from the chalet on every side! Geneva lying under us, with the lake and the whole plain bounded by the Jura and our own Salève, which latter seems rather close behind our house, and yet takes a hard hour and a half to ascend — all this you can imagine since you know the environs of the town; the peace and quiet move me the most. And I fancy I shall drowse out the two months or more, doing no more of serious work than reading — and that is virtuous renunciation of the glorious view to my right here — as I sit aerially like Euripides, and see the clouds come and go, and the view change in correspondence with them. It will help me to get rid

of the pain which attaches itself to the recollections of Lucerne and Berne 'in the old days when the Greeks suffered so much,' as Homer says. But a very real and sharp pain touched me here when I heard of the death of poor Virginia Marsh, whom I knew particularly, and parted with hardly a fortnight ago, leaving her affectionate and happy as ever. The tones of her voice as on one memorable occasion she ejaculated repeatedly *Good friend!* are fresh still. Poor Virginia!" . . .

Mr. Browning was more than quiescent during this stay in the Savoyard mountains. He was unusually depressed, and unusually disposed to regard the absence from home as a banishment; and he tried subsequently to account for this condition by the shadow which coming trouble sometimes casts before it. It was more probably due to the want of the sea air which he had enjoyed for so many years, and to that special oppressive heat of the Swiss valleys which ascends with them to almost their highest level. When he said that the Salève seemed close behind

the house, he was saying in other words that the sun beat back from, and the air was intercepted by it. We see, nevertheless, in his description of the surrounding scenery, a promise of the contemplative delight in natural beauty to be henceforth so conspicuous in his experience, and which seemed a new feature in it. He had hitherto approached every living thing with curious and sympathetic observation — this hardly requires saying of one who had animals for his first and always familiar friends. Flowers also attracted him by their perfume. But what he loved in nature was essentially its prefiguring of human existence, or its echo of it; and it never appeared, in either his works or his conversation, that he was much impressed by its inanimate forms — by even those larger phenomena of mountain and cloud-land on which the letter dwells. Such beauty as most appealed to him he had left behind with the joys and sorrows of his Italian life, and it had almost inevitably passed out of his consideration. During years of his residence in London he

never thought of the country as a source of pleasurable emotions, other than those contingent on renewed health; and the places to which he resorted had often not much beyond their health-giving qualities to recommend them; his appetite for the beautiful had probably dwindled for lack of food. But when a friend once said to him: "You have not a great love for nature, have you?" he had replied: "Yes, I have, but I love men and women better;" and the admission, which conveyed more than it literally expressed, would have been true, I believe, at any, up to the present, period of his history. Even now he did not cease to love men and women best; but he found increasing enjoyment in the beauties of nature, above all as they opened upon him on the southern slopes of the Alps; and the delight of the æsthetic sense merged gradually in the satisfied craving for pure air and brilliant sunshine which marked his final struggle for physical life. A ring of enthusiasm comes into his letters from the mountains, and deepens as the years

advance ; doubtless enhanced by the great — perhaps too great — exhilaration which the Alpine atmosphere produced, but also in large measure independent of it. Each new place into which the summer carries him he declares more beautiful than the last. It possibly was so.

A touch of autumnal freshness had barely crept into the atmosphere of the Salève, when a moral thunderbolt fell on the little group of persons domiciled at its base : Miss Egerton-Smith died, in what had seemed for her unusually good health, in the act of preparing for a mountain excursion with her friends — the words still almost on her lips in which she had given some directions for their comfort. Mr. Browning's impressionable nervous system was for a moment paralyzed by the shock. It revived in all the emotional and intellectual impulses which gave birth to "La Saisiaz."

This poem contains, besides its personal reference and association, elements of distinctive biographical interest. It is the author's first — as also last — attempt to reconstruct his

hope of immortality by a rational process based entirely on the fundamental facts of his own knowledge and consciousness — God and the human soul; and while the very assumption of these facts, as basis for reasoning, places him at issue with scientific thought, there is in his way of handling them a tribute to the scientific spirit, perhaps foreshadowed in the beautiful epilogue to "Dramatis Personæ," but of which there is no trace in his earlier religious works. It is conclusive both in form and matter as to his heterodox attitude towards Christianity. He was no less, in his way, a Christian when he wrote "La Saisiaz" than when he published a "Death in the Desert" and "Christmas Eve and Easter Day;" or at any period subsequent to that in which he accepted without questioning what he had learned at his mother's knee. He has repeatedly written or declared in the words of Charles Lamb:[1] "If Christ entered the room

[1] These words have more significance when taken with their context. "If Shakespeare was to come into the room, we should all rise up to meet him; but if that Person [meaning Christ] was to come into the room, we should all fall down and try to kiss the hem of his garment."

I should fall on my knees;" and again, in those of Napoleon: "I am an understander of men, and *He* was no man." He has even added: "If he had been, he would have been an impostor." But the arguments, in great part negative, set forth in "La Saisiaz" for the immortality of the soul leave no place for the idea, however indefinite, of a Christian revelation on the subject. Christ remained for Mr. Browning a mystery and a message of Divine Love, but no messenger of Divine intention towards mankind.

The dialogue between Fancy and Reason is not only an admission of uncertainty as to the future of the Soul: it is a plea for it; and as such it gathers up into its few words of direct statement threads of reasoning which have been traceable throughout Mr. Browning's work. In this plea for uncertainty lies also a full and frank acknowledgment of the value of the earthly life; and as interpreted by his general views, that value asserts itself, not only in the means of probation which life affords, but in its existing conditions of happi-

ness. No one, he declares, possessing the certainty of a future state would patiently and fully live out the present; and since the future can be only the ripened fruit of the present, its promise would be neutralized, as well as actual experience dwarfed, by a definite revelation. Nor, conversely, need the want of a certified future depress the present spiritual and moral life. It is in the nature of the Soul that it would suffer from the promise. The existence of God is a justification for hope. And since the certainty would be injurious to the Soul, hence destructive to itself, the doubt — in other words, the hope — becomes a sufficient approach to, a working substitute for it. It is pathetic to see how in spite of the convictions thus rooted in Mr. Browning's mind, the expressed craving for more knowledge, for more light, will now and then escape him.

Even orthodox Christianity gives no assurance of reunion to those whom death has separated. It is obvious that Mr. Browning's poetic creed could hold no conviction regard-

ing it. He hoped for such reunion in proportion as he wished. There must have been moments in his life when the wish in its passion overleapt the bounds of hope. "Prospice" appears to prove this. But the wide range of imagination, no less than the lack of knowledge, forbade in him any forecast of the possibilities of the life to come. He believed that if granted, it would be an advance on the present — an accession of knowledge if not an increase of happiness. He was satisfied that whatever it gave, and whatever it withheld, it would be good. In his normal condition this sufficed to him.

"La Saisiaz" appeared in the early summer of 1878, and with it "The Two Poets of Croisic," which had been written immediately after it. The various incidents of this poem are strictly historical; they lead the way to a characteristic utterance of Mr. Browning's philosophy of life to which I shall recur later.

In 1872 Mr. Browning had published a first series of selections from his works; it was to be followed by a second in 1880. In a

preface to the earlier volume, he indicates the plan which he has followed in the choice and arrangement of poems; and some such intention runs also through the second; since he declined a suggestion made to him for the introduction or placing of a special poem, on the ground of its not conforming to the end he had in view. It is difficult, in the one case as in the other, to reconstruct the imagined personality to which his preface refers; and his words on the later occasion pointed rather to that idea of a chord of feeling which is raised by the correspondence of the first and last poems of the respective groups. But either clue may be followed with interest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

1878–1884.

He revisits Italy; Asolo; Letters to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald. — Venice. — Favorite Alpine Retreats. — Mrs. Arthur Bronson. — Life in Venice. — A Tragedy at Saint-Pierre. — Mr. Cholmondeley. — Mr. Browning's Patriotic Feeling; Extract from Letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow. — "Dramatic Idyls." — "Jocoseria." — "Ferishtah's Fancies."

THE catastrophe of La Saisiaz closed a comprehensive chapter in Mr. Browning's habits and experience. It impelled him finally to break with the associations of the last seventeen autumns, which he remembered more in their tedious or painful circumstances than in the unexciting pleasure and renewed physical health which he had derived from them. He was weary of the ever-recurring effort to uproot himself from his home life, only to become stationary in some more or less uninteresting northern spot. The always

latent desire for Italy sprang up in him, and with it the often present thought and wish to give his sister the opportunity of seeing it.

Florence and Rome were not included in his scheme; he knew them both too well; but he hankered for Asolo and Venice. He determined, though as usual reluctantly, and not till the last moment, that they should move southwards in the August of 1878. Their route lay over the Splügen; and having heard of a comfortable hotel near the summit of the Pass, they agreed to remain there till the heat had sufficiently abated to allow of the descent into Lombardy. The advantages of this first arrangement exceeded their expectations. It gave them solitude without the sense of loneliness. A little stream of travelers passed constantly over the mountain, and they could shake hands with acquaintances at night, and know them gone in the morning. They dined at the table d'hôte, but took all other meals alone, and slept in a detached wing or *dépendance* of the hotel. Their daily walks sometimes carried them

down to the Via Mala; often to the top of the ascent, where they could rest, looking down into Italy; and would even be prolonged over a period of five hours and an extent of seventeen miles. Now, as always, the mountain air stimulated Mr. Browning's physical energy; and on this occasion it also especially quickened his imaginative powers. He was preparing the first series of "Dramatic Idyls;" and several of these, including "Iván Iványovitch," were produced with such rapidity that Miss Browning refused to countenance a prolonged stay on the mountain, unless he worked at a more reasonable rate.

They did not linger on their way to Asolo and Venice, except for a night's rest on the Lake of Como and two days at Verona. In their successive journeys through Northern Italy they visited by degrees all its notable cities, and it would be easy to recall, in order and detail, most of these yearly expeditions. But the account of them would chiefly resolve itself into a list of names and dates; for Mr. Browning had seldom a new impression

to receive, even from localities which he had not seen before. I know that he and his sister were deeply struck by the deserted grandeurs of Ravenna; and that it stirred in both of them a memorable sensation to wander as they did for a whole day through the pine-woods consecrated by Dante. I am nevertheless not sure that when they performed the repeated round of picture-galleries and palaces, they were not sometimes simply paying their debt to opportunity, and as much for each other's sake as for their own. Where all was Italy, there was little to gain or lose in one memorial of greatness, one object of beauty, visited or left unseen. But in Asolo, even in Venice, Mr. Browning was seeking something more: the remembrance of his own actual and poetic youth. How far he found it in the former place we may infer from a letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald.

September 28, 1878.

And from *Asolo*, at last, dear friend! So can dreams come *false*. S., who has been

writing at the opposite side of the table, has told you about our journey and adventures, such as they were: but she cannot tell you the feelings with which I revisit this — to me — memorable place after above forty years' absence — such things have begun and ended with me in the interval! It was *too* strange when we reached the ruined tower on the hill-top yesterday, and I said, "Let me try if the echo still exists which I discovered here" (you can produce it from only *one* particular spot on a remainder of brickwork), and thereupon it answered me plainly as ever, after all the silence: for some children from the adjoining *podere*, happening to be outside, heard my voice and its result — and began trying to perform the feat — calling "Yes, yes" — all in vain: so, perhaps, the mighty secret will die with me! We shall probably stay here a day or two longer — the air is so pure, the country so attractive: but we must go soon to Venice, stay our allotted time there, and then go homeward: you will of course address letters to Venice, not this place: it is a

pleasure I promise myself that, on arriving I shall certainly hear you speak in a letter which I count upon finding.

The old inn here, to which I would fain have betaken myself, is gone — leveled to the ground: I remember it was much damaged by a recent earthquake, and the cracks and chasms may have threatened a downfall. This Stella d' Oro is, however, much such an unperverted *locanda* as its predecessor — primitive indeed are the arrangements and unsophisticate the ways: but there is cleanliness, abundance of goodwill, and the sweet Italian smile at every mistake: we get on excellently. To be sure, never was such a perfect fellow-traveler, for my purposes, as S., so that I have no subject of concern — if things suit me they suit her — and vice versâ. I dare say she will have told you how we trudged together, this morning to Possagno — through a lovely country: how we saw all the wonders — and a wonder of detestability is the paint-performance of the great man! — and how, on our return, we found the little town enjoy-

ing high market day, and its privilege of roaring and screaming over a bargain. It confuses me altogether — but at Venice I may write more comfortably. You will till then, dear friend, remember me ever as yours affectionately,

ROBERT BROWNING.

If the tone of this does not express disappointment, it has none of the rapture which his last visit was to inspire. The charm which forty years of remembrance had cast around the little city on the hill was dispelled, for, at all events, the time being. The hot weather and dust-covered landscape, with the more than primitive accommodation of which he spoke in a letter to another friend, may have contributed something to this result.

At Venice the travelers fared better in some essential respects. A London acquaintance, who passed them on their way to Italy, had recommended a cool and quiet hotel there, the Albergo dell' Universo. The house, Palazzo Brandolin-Rota, was situated on the shady

side of the Grand Canal, just below the Accademia and the Suspension Bridge. The open stretches of the Guidecca lay not far behind; and a scrap of garden and a clean and open little street made pleasant the approach from back and side. It accommodated few persons in proportion to its size, and fewer still took up their abode there; for it was managed by a lady of good birth and fallen fortunes whose home and patrimony it had been; and her husband, a retired Austrian officer, and two grown-up daughters, did not lighten her task. Every year the fortunes sank lower: the upper story of the house was already falling into decay, and the fine old furniture passing into the brokers' or private buyers' hands. It still, however, afforded sufficiently comfortable, and, by reason of its very drawbacks, desirable quarters to Mr. Browning. It perhaps turned the scale in favor of his return to Venice; for the lady whose hospitality he was to enjoy there was as yet unknown to him; and nothing would have induced him to enter, with his eyes open,

one of the English-haunted hotels, in which acquaintance, old and new, would daily greet him in the public rooms, or jostle him in the corridors.

He and his sister remained at the Universo for a fortnight; their programme did not this year include a longer stay; but it gave them time to decide that no place could better suit them for an autumn holiday than Venice, or better lend itself to a preparatory sojourn among the Alps; and the plan of their next, and, though they did not know it, many a following summer, was thus sketched out before the homeward journey had begun.

Mr. Browning did not forget his work, even while resting from it; if indeed he did rest entirely on this occasion. He consulted a Russian lady whom he met at the hotel, on the names he was introducing in "Iván Ivánovitch." It would be interesting to know what suggestions or corrections she made, and how far they adapted themselves to the rhythm already established, or compelled changes in it; but the one alternative would as little have

troubled him as the other. Mrs. Browning told Mr. Prinsep that her husband could never alter the wording of a poem without rewriting it, indeed, practically converting it into another; though he more than once tried to do so at her instigation. But to the end of his life he could at any moment recast a line or passage for the sake of greater correctness, and leave all that was essential in it untouched.

Seven times more in the eleven years which remained to him, Mr. Browning spent the autumn in Venice. Once also, in 1882, he had proceeded towards it as far as Verona, when the floods which marked the autumn of that year arrested his farther course. Each time he had halted first in some more or less elevated spot, generally suggested by his French friend, Monsieur Dourlans, himself an inveterate wanderer, whose inclinations also tempted him off the beaten track. The places he most enjoyed were Saint-Pierre la Chartreuse, and Gressoney Saint-Jean, where he stayed respectively in 1881 and 1882, 1883 and 1885.

Both of these had the drawbacks, and what might easily have been the dangers, of remoteness from the civilized world. But this weighed with him so little that he remained there in each case till the weather had broken, though there was no sheltered conveyance in which he and his sister could travel down; and on the later occasions at least, circumstances might easily have combined to prevent their departure for an indefinite time. He became, indeed, so attached to Gressoney, with its beautiful outlook upon Monte Rosa, that nothing, I believe, would have hindered his returning, or at least contemplating a return to it, but the great fatigue to his sister of the mule ride up the mountain, by a path which made walking, wherever possible, the easier course. They did walk *down* it in the early October of 1885, and completed the hard seven hours' trudge to San Martino d' Aosta, without an atom of refreshment or a minute's rest.

One of the great attractions of Saint-Pierre was the vicinity of the Grande Chartreuse, to

which Mr. Browning made frequent expeditions, staying there through the night in order to hear the midnight mass. Miss Browning also once attempted the visit, but was not allowed to enter the monastery. She slept in the adjoining convent.

The brother and sister were again at the Universo in 1879, 1880, and 1881; but the crash was rapidly approaching, and soon afterwards it came. The old Palazzo passed into other hands, and after a short period of private ownership was consigned to the purposes of an art gallery.

In 1880, however, they had been introduced by Mrs. Story to an American resident, Mrs. Arthur Bronson, and entered into most friendly relations with her; and when, after a year's interval, they were again contemplating an autumn in Venice, she placed at their disposal a suite of rooms in the Palazzo Giustiniani Recanati, which formed a supplement to her own house — making the offer with a kindly urgency which forbade all thought of declining it. They inhabited these

for a second time in 1885, keeping house for themselves in the simple but comfortable foreign manner they both so well enjoyed, only dining and spending the evening with their friend. But when, in 1888, they were going, as they thought, to repeat the arrangement, they found, to their surprise, a little apartment prepared for them under Mrs. Bronson's own roof. This act of hospitality involved a special kindness on her part, of which Mr. Browning only became aware at the close of a prolonged stay; and a sense of increased gratitude added itself to the affectionate regard with which his hostess had already inspired both his sister and him. So far as he is concerned, the fact need only be indicated. It is fully expressed in the preface to "Asolando."

During the first and fresher period of Mr. Browning's visits to Venice, he found a passing attraction in its society. It held an historical element which harmonized well with the decayed magnificence of the city, its old-world repose, and the comparatively simple

modes of intercourse still prevailing there. Mrs. Bronson's *salon* was hospitably open whenever her health allowed; but her natural refinement, and the conservatism which so strongly marks the higher class of Americans, preserved it from the heterogeneous character which Anglo-foreign sociability so often assumes. Very interesting, even important names lent their prestige to her circle; and those of Don Carlos and his family, of Prince and Princess Iturbide, of Prince and Princess Metternich, and of Princess Montenegro were on the list of her *habitués*, and, in the case of the royal Spaniards, of her friends. It need hardly be said that the great English poet, with his fast spreading reputation and his infinite social charm, was kindly welcomed and warmly appreciated amongst them.

English and American acquaintances also congregated in Venice, or passed through it from London, Florence, and Rome. Those resident in Italy could make their visits coincide with those of Mr. Browning and his sister, or undertake the journey for the sake of

seeing them; while the outward conditions of life were such as to render friendly intercourse more satisfactory, and common social civilities less irksome than they could be at home. Mr. Browning was, however, already too advanced in years, too familiar with everything which the world can give, to be long affected by the novelty of these experiences. It was inevitable that the need of rest, though often for the moment forgotten, should assert itself more and more. He gradually declined on the society of a small number of resident or semi-resident friends; and, due exception being made for the hospitalities of his temporary home, became indebted to the kindness of Sir Henry and Lady Layard, of Mr. and Mrs. Curtis of Palazzo Barbaro, and of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic Eden, for most of the social pleasure and comfort of his later residences in Venice.

Part of a letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald gives an insight into the character of his life there: all the stronger that it was written under a temporary depression which it partly serves to explain.

ALBERGO DELL' UNIVERSO, VENEZIA, ITALIA,
September 24, 1881.

DEAR FRIEND, — On arriving here I found your letter to my great satisfaction — and yesterday brought the "Saturday Review" — for which, many thanks.

We left our strange but lovely place on the 18th, reaching Chambéry at evening — stayed the next day there — walking, among other diversions, to "Les Charmettes," the famous abode of Rousseau — kept much as when he left it: I visited it with my wife perhaps twenty-five years ago, and played so much of "Rousseau's Dream" as could be effected on his antique harpsichord: this time I attempted the same feat, but only two notes or thereabouts out of the octave would answer the touch. Next morning we proceeded to Turin, and on Wednesday got here, in the middle of the last night of the Congress Carnival — rowing up the canal to our Albergo through a dazzling blaze of lights and throng of boats — there being, if we are told truly, 50,000 strangers in the city. Rooms had

been secured for us, however: and the festivities are at an end, to my great joy — for Venice is resuming its old quiet aspect — the only one I value at all. Our American friends wanted to take us in their gondola to see the principal illuminations *after* the "Serenade," which was not over before midnight — but I was contented with *that* — being tired and indisposed for talking, and, having seen and heard quite enough from our own balcony, went to bed: S. having betaken her to her own room long before.

Next day we took stock of our acquaintances — found that the Storys, on whom we had counted for company, were at Vallombrosa, though the two sons have a studio here — other friends are in sufficient number, however — and last evening we began our visits by a very classical one — to the Countess Mocenigo, in her palace which Byron occupied: she is a charming widow since two years — young, pretty, and of the prettiest manners: she showed us all the rooms Byron had lived in — and I wrote my name in her album *on*

the desk himself wrote the last canto of "Ch. Harold" and "Beppo" upon. There was a small party: we were taken and introduced by the Layards, who are kind as ever, and I met old friends — Lord Aberdare, Charles Bowen, and others. While I write comes a deliciously fresh bouquet from Mrs. Bronson, an American lady — in short we shall find a week or two amusing enough; though — where are the pine-woods, mountains and torrents, and wonderful air? Venice is under a cloud — dull and threatening — though we were apprehensive of heat, arriving, as we did, ten days earlier than last year. . . .

The evening's programme was occasionally varied by a visit to one of the theatres. The plays given were chiefly in the Venetian dialect, and needed previous study for their enjoyment; but Mr. Browning assisted at one musical performance which strongly appealed to his historical and artistic sensibilities: that of the "Barbiere" of Paisiello in the Rossini theatre and in the presence of Wagner, which took place in the autumn of 1880.

Although the manner of his sojourn in the Italian city placed all the resources of resident life at his command, Mr. Browning never abjured the active habits of the English traveler. He daily walked with his sister, as he did in the mountains, for walking's sake, as well as for the delight of what his expeditions showed him; and the facilities which they supplied for this healthful pleasurable exercise were to his mind one of the great merits of his autumn residences in Italy. He explored Venice in all directions, and learned to know its many points of beauty and interest, as those cannot who believe it is only to be seen from a gondola; and when he had visited its every corner, he fell back on a favorite stroll along the Riva to the public garden and back again; never failing to leave the house at about the same hour of the day. Later still, when a friend's gondola was always at hand, and air and sunshine were the one thing needful, he would be carried to the Lido, and take a long stretch on its farther shore.

The letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, from which

I have already quoted, concludes with the account of a tragic occurrence which took place at Saint-Pierre just before his departure, and in which Mr. Browning's intuitions had played a striking part.

"And what do you think befell us in this abode of peace and innocence? Our journey was delayed for three hours in consequence of the one mule of the village being requisitioned by the *Juge d'Instruction* from Grenoble, come to inquire into a murder committed two days before. My sister and I used once a day to walk for a couple of hours up a mountain-road of the most lovely description, and stop at the summit, whence we looked down upon the minute hamlet of Saint-Pierre d'Entremont — even more secluded than our own: then we got back to our own aforesaid. And in this Paradisial place, they found, yesterday week, a murdered man — frightfully mutilated — who had been caught apparently in the act of stealing potatoes in a field: such a crime had never occurred in the memory of the oldest of our folk. Who was the mur-

derer is the mystery — whether the field's owner — in his irritation at discovering the robber — or one of a band of similar *charbonniers* (for they suppose the man to be a Piedmontese of that occupation) remains to be proved: they began by imprisoning the owner, who denies his guilt energetically. Now the odd thing is, that, either the day of, or after the murder — as I and S. were looking at the utter solitude, I had the fancy 'What should I do if I suddenly came upon a dead body in this field? Go and proclaim it — and subject myself to all the vexations inflicted by the French way of procedure (which begins by assuming that you may be the criminal) — or neglect an obvious duty, and return silently.' I, of course, saw that the former was the only proper course, whatever the annoyance involved. And, all the while, there was just about to be the very same incident for the trouble of somebody."

Here the account breaks off; but writing again from the same place, August 16, 1882, he takes up the suspended narrative with this question: —

"Did I tell you of what happened to me on the last day of my stay here last year?" And after repeating the main facts continues as follows: —

"This morning, in the course of my walk, I entered into conversation with two persons of whom I made inquiry myself. They said the accused man, a simple person, had been locked up in a high chamber — protesting his innocence strongly — and troubled in his mind by the affair altogether and the turn it was taking, had profited by the gendarme's negligence, and thrown himself out of the window — and so died, continuing to the last to protest as before. My presentiment of what such a person might have to undergo was justified, you see — though I should not in any case have taken *that* way of getting out of the difficulty. The man added, 'It was not he who committed the murder, but the companions of the man, an Italian charcoal-burner, who owed him a grudge, killed him, and dragged him to the field — filling his sack with potatoes as if stolen, to give a

likelihood that the field's owner had caught him stealing and killed him — so M. Perrier the greffier told me.' Enough of this grim story.

. . . . . .

"My sister was anxious to know exactly where the body was found: '*Vous savez la croix au sommet de la colline? A cette distance de cela!*' That is precisely where I was standing when the thought came over me."

A passage in a subsequent letter of September 3 clearly refers to some comment of Mrs. Fitz-Gerald's on the peculiar nature of this presentiment: —

"No, I attribute no sort of supernaturalism to my fancy about the thing that was really about to take place. By a law of the association of ideas — *contraries* come into the mind as often as *similarities* — and the peace and solitude readily called up the notion of what would most jar with them. I have often thought of the trouble that might have befallen me if poor Miss Smith's death

had happened the night before, when we were on the mountain alone together — or next morning when we were on the proposed excursion — only *then* we should have had companions."

The letter then passes to other subjects : —

"This is the fifth magnificent day — like magnificence, unfit for turning to much account, for we cannot walk till sunset. I had two hours' walk, or nearly, before breakfast, however. It is the loveliest country I ever had experience of, and we shall prolong our stay, perhaps. Apart from the concern for poor Cholmondeley and his friends, I should be glad to apprehend no long journey — besides the annoyance of having to pass Florence and Rome unvisited, for S.'s sake, I mean : even Naples would have been with its wonderful environs a tantalizing impracticability.

"Your 'Academy' came and was welcomed. The newspaper is like an electric eel, as one touches it and expects a shock. I am very anxious about the Archbishop, who has always been strangely kind to me."

He and his sister had accepted an invitation to spend the month of October with Mr. Cholmondeley at his villa in Ischia; but the party assembled there was broken up by the death of one of Mr. Cholmondeley's guests, a young lady who had imprudently attempted the ascent of a dangerous mountain without a guide, and who lost her life in the experiment.

A short extract from a letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow will show that even in this complete seclusion Mr. Browning's patriotism did not go to sleep. There had been already sufficient evidence that his friendship did not; but it was not in the nature of his mental activities that they should be largely absorbed by politics, though he followed the course of his country's history as a necessary part of his own life. It needed a crisis like that of our Egyptian campaign, or the subsequent Irish struggle, to arouse him to a full emotional participation in current events. How deeply he could be thus aroused remained yet to be seen.

"If the George Smiths are still with you, give them my love, and tell them we shall expect to see them at Venice — which was not so likely to be the case when we were bound for Ischia. As for Lady Wolseley — one dares not pretend to vie with her in anxiety just now; but my own pulses beat pretty strongly when I open the day's newspaper — which, by some new arrangement, reaches us, oftener than not, on the day after publication. Where is your Bertie? I had an impassioned letter, a fortnight ago, from a nephew of mine, who is in the second division [battalion?] of the Black Watch. He was ordered to Edinburgh, and the regiment not dispatched, after all — it having just returned from India. The poor fellow wrote, in his despair, 'to know if I could do anything!' He may be wanted yet: though nothing seems wanted in Egypt, so capital appears to be the management."

In 1879 Mr. Browning published the first series of his "Dramatic Idyls;" and their appearance sent a thrill of surprised admiration

through the public mind. In "La Saisiaz" and the accompanying poems he had accomplished what was virtually a life's work. For he was approaching the appointed limit of man's existence; and the poetic, which had been nourished in him by the natural life — which had once outstripped its developments, but on the whole remained subject to them — had therefore, also, passed through the successive phases of individual growth. He had been inspired as dramatic poet by the one avowed conviction that little else is worth study but the history of a soul; and outward act or circumstance had only entered into his creations as condition or incident of the given psychological state. His dramatic imagination had first, however unconsciously, sought its materials in himself; then gradually been projected into the world of men and women, which his widening knowledge laid open to him; it is scarcely necessary to say that its power was only fully revealed when it left the remote regions of poetical and metaphysical self-consciousness, to invoke the not less mys-

terious and far more searching utterance of the general human heart. It was a matter of course that in this expression of his dramatic genius, the intellectual and emotional should exhibit the varying relations which are developed by the natural life: that feeling should begin by doing the work of thought, as in "Saul," and thought end by doing the work of feeling, as in "Fifine at the Fair;" and that the two should alternate or combine in proportioned intensity in such works of an intermediate period as "Cleon," "A Death in the Desert," the "Epistle of Karshish," and "James Lee's Wife;" the sophistical ingenuities of "Bishop Blougram," and "Sludge;" and the sad, appealing tenderness of "Andrea del Sarto" and "The Worst of It."

It was also almost inevitable that so vigorous a genius should sometimes falsify calculations based on the normal life. The long continued force and freshness of Mr. Browning's general faculties was in itself a protest against them. We saw without surprise that during the decade which produced "Prince

Hohenstiel-Schwangau," "Fifine at the Fair," and "Red Cotton Nightcap Country" he could give us "The Inn Album," with its expression of the higher sexual love unsurpassed, rarely equaled, in the whole range of his work: or those two unique creations of airy fancy and passionate symbolic romance, "Saint Martin's Summer" and "Numpholeptos." It was no ground for astonishment that the creative power in him should even ignore the usual period of decline, and defy, so far as is humanly possible, its natural laws of modification. But in the "Dramatic Idyls" he did more than proceed with unflagging powers on a long-trodden, distinctive course; he took a new departure.

Mr. Browning did not forsake the drama of motive when he imagined and worked out his new group of poems; he presented it in a no less subtle and complex form. But he gave it the added force of picturesque realization; and this by means of incidents both powerful in themselves and especially suited for its development. It was only in proportion to

this higher suggestiveness that a startling situation ever seemed to him fit subject for poetry. Where its interest and excitement exhausted themselves in the external facts, it became, he thought, the property of the chronicler, but supplied no material for the poet; and he often declined matter which had been offered him for dramatic treatment because it belonged to the more sensational category.

It is part of the vital quality of the "Dramatic Idyls" that in them the act and the motive are not yet finally identified with each other. We see the act still palpitating with the motive; the motive dimly striving to recognize or disclaim itself in the act. It is in this that the psychological poet stands more than ever strongly revealed. Such at least is the case in "Martin Relph," and the idealized Russian legend "Ivàn Ivànovitch." The grotesque tragedy of "Ned Bratts" has also its marked psychological aspects, but they are of a simpler and broader kind.

The new inspiration slowly subsided through

the second series of "Idyls," 1880, and "Jocoseria," 1883. In "Ferishtah's Fancies," 1884, Mr. Browning returned to his original manner, though carrying into it something of the renewed vigor which had marked the intervening change. The lyrics which alternate with its parables include some of the most tender, most impassioned, and most musical of his love-poems.

The moral and religious opinions conveyed in this later volume may be accepted without reserve as Mr. Browning's own, if we subtract from them the exaggerations of the figurative and dramatic form. It is indeed easy to recognize in them the undercurrents of his whole real and imaginative life. They have also on one or two points an intrinsic value which will justify a later allusion.

CHAPTER XIX.

1881–1887.

The Browning Society ; Mr. Furnivall ; Miss E. H. Hickey. — His Attitude towards the Society ; Letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald. — Mr. Thaxter ; Mrs. Celia Thaxter. — Letter to Miss Hickey ; "Strafford." — Shakspere and Wordsworth Societies. — Letters to Professor Knight. — Appreciation in Italy ; Professor Nencioni. — The Goldoni Sonnet. — Mr. Barrett Browning ; Palazzo Manzoni. — Letters to Mrs. Charles Skirrow. — Mrs. Bloomfield Moore. — Llangollen ; Sir Theodore and Lady Martin. — Loss of old Friends. — Foreign Correspondent of the Royal Academy. — "Parleyings with certain People of Importance in their Day."

THIS Indian summer of Mr. Browning's genius coincided with the highest manifestation of public interest which he, or with one exception, any living writer, had probably yet received : the establishment of a Society bearing his name, and devoted to the study of his poetry. The idea arose almost simultaneously in the mind of Dr., then Mr. Furnivall, and

Miss E. H. Hickey. One day, in the July of 1881, as they were on their way to Warwick Crescent to pay an appointed visit there, Miss Hickey strongly expressed her opinion of the power and breadth of Mr. Browning's work; and concluded by saying that much as she loved Shakespeare, she found in certain aspects of Browning what even Shakespeare could not give her. Mr. Furnivall replied to this by asking what she would say to helping him to found a Browning Society; and it then appeared that Miss Hickey had recently written to him a letter, suggesting that he should found one; but that it had miscarried, or, as she was disposed to think, not been posted. Being thus, at all events, agreed as to the fitness of the undertaking, they immediately spoke of it to Mr. Browning, who at first treated the project as a joke; but did not oppose it when once he understood it to be serious. His only proviso was that he should remain neutral in respect to its fulfillment. He refused even to give Mr. Furnivall the name or address of any friends whose interest

in himself or his work might render their coöperation probable.

This passive assent sufficed. A printed prospectus was now issued. About two hundred members were soon secured. A committee was elected, of which Mr. J. T. Nettleship, already well known as a Browning student, was one of the most conspicuous members; and by the end of October a small Society had come into existence, which held its inaugural meeting in the Botanic Theatre of University College. Mr. Furnivall, its principal founder, and responsible organizer, was Chairman of the Committee, and Miss E. H. Hickey, the co-founder, was Honorary Secretary. When, two or three years afterwards, illness compelled her to resign this position, it was assumed by Mr. J. Dykes Campbell.

Although nothing could be more unpretending than the action of this Browning Society, or in the main more genuine than its motive, it did not begin life without encountering ridicule and mistrust. The formation of a Ruskin Society in the previous year

had already established a precedent for allowing a still living worker to enjoy the fruits of his work, or, as some one termed it, for making a man a classic during his lifetime. But this fact was not yet generally known; and meanwhile a curious contradiction developed itself in the popular mind. The outer world of Mr. Browning's acquaintance continued to condemn the too great honor which was being done to him; from those of the inner circle he constantly received condolences on being made the subject of proceedings which, according to them, he must somehow regard as an offense.

This was the last view of the case which he was prepared to take. At the beginning, as at the end, he felt honored by the intentions of the Society. He probably, it is true, had occasional misgivings as to its future. He could not be sure that its action would always be judicious, still less that it would be always successful. He was prepared for its being laughed at, and for himself being included in the laughter. He consented to its establish-

ment for what seemed to him the one unanswerable reason, that he had, even on the ground of taste, no just cause for forbidding it. No line, he considered, could be drawn between the kind of publicity which every writer seeks, which, for good or evil, he had already obtained, and that which the Browning Society was conferring on him. His works would still, as before, be read, analyzed, and discussed *vivâ voce* and in print. That these proceedings would now take place in other localities than drawing-rooms or clubs, through other organs than newspapers or magazines, by other and larger groups of persons than those usually gathered round a dinner or a tea table, involved no real change in the situation. In any case, he had made himself public property; and those who thus organized their study of him were exercising an individual right. If his own rights had been assailed he would have guarded them also; but the circumstances of the case precluded such a contingency. And he had his reward. How he felt towards the Society at

the close of its first session is better indicated in the following letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald than in the note to Mr. Yates which Mr. Sharp has published, and which was written with more reserve and, I believe, at a rather earlier date. Even the shade of condescension which lingers about his words will have been effaced by subsequent experience; and many letters written to Dr. Furnivall must, since then, have attested his grateful and affectionate appreciation of kindness intended and service done to him.

. . . They always treat me gently in "Punch" — why don't you do the same by the Browning Society? I see you emphasize Miss Hickey's acknowledgment of defects in time and want of rehearsal: but I look for no great perfection in a number of kindly disposed strangers to me personally, who try to interest people in my poems by singing and reading them. They give their time for nothing, offer their little entertainment for nothing, and certainly get next to nothing in the

way of thanks — unless from myself who feel grateful to the faces I shall never see, the voices I shall never hear. The kindest notices I have had, or at all events those that have given me most pleasure, have been educed by this Society — A. Sidgwick's paper, that of Professor Corson, Miss Lewis's article in this month's "Macmillan" — and I feel grateful for it all, for my part — and none the less for a little amusement at the wonder of some of my friends that I do not jump up and denounce the practices which must annoy me so much. Oh! my "gentle Shakespeare," how well you felt and said — "never anything can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it." So, dear Lady, here is my duty and simplicity tendering itself to you, with all affection besides, and I being ever yours, R. Browning.

That general disposition of the London world which left the ranks of the little Society to be three fourths recruited among persons, many living at a distance, whom the poet did

not know, became also in its way a satisfaction. It was with him a matter of course, though never of indifference, that his closer friends of both sexes were among its members; it was one of real gratification that they included from the beginning such men as Dean Boyle of Salisbury, the Rev. Llewellyn Davies, George Meredith, and James Cotter Morison — that they enjoyed the sympathy and coöperation of such a one as Archdeacon Farrar. But he had an ingenuous pride in reading the large remainder of the Society's lists of names, and pointing out the fact that there was not one among them which he had ever heard. It was equivalent to saying, "All these people care for me as a poet. No social interest, no personal prepossession, has attracted them to my work." And when the unknown name was not only appended to a list; when it formed the signature of a paper — excellent or indifferent as might be, but in either case bearing witness to a careful and unobtrusive study of his poems — by so much was the gratification increased. He sel-

dom weighed the intrinsic merit of such productions; he did not read them critically. No man was ever more adverse to the seeming ungraciousness of analyzing the quality of a gift. In real life indeed this power of gratitude sometimes defeated its own end, by neutralizing his insight into the motive or effort involved in different acts of kindness, and placing them all successively on the same plane.

In the present case, however, an ungraduated acceptance of the labor bestowed on him was part of the neutral attitude which it was his constant endeavor to maintain. He always refrained from noticing any erroneous statement concerning himself or his works which might appear in the Papers of the Society: since, as he alleged, if he once began to correct, he would appear to indorse whatever he left uncorrected, and thus make himself responsible, not only for any interpretation that might be placed on his poems, but, what was far more serious, for every eulogium that was bestowed upon them. He could not stand aloof as entirely as he or even his friends de-

sired, since it was usual with some members of the Society to seek from him elucidations of obscure passages which, without these, it was declared, would be a stumbling-block to future readers. But he disliked being even to this extent drawn into its operation ; and his help was, I believe, less and less frequently invoked. Nothing could be more false than the rumor which once arose that he superintended those performances of his plays which took place under the direction of the Society. Once only, and by the urgent desire of some of the actors, did he witness a last rehearsal of one of them.

It was also a matter of course that men and women brought together by a preëxisting interest in Mr. Browning's work should often ignore its authorized explanations, and should read and discuss it in the light of personal impressions more congenial to their own mind; and the various and circumstantial views sometimes elicited by a given poem did not serve to render it more intelligible. But the merit of true poetry lies so largely in its suggestive-

ness, that even mistaken impressions of it have their positive value and also their relative truth; and the intellectual friction which was thus created, not only in the parent society, but in its offshoots in England and America, was not their least important result.

These Societies conferred, it need hardly be said, no less real benefits on the public at large. They extended the sale of Mr. Browning's works, and with it their distinct influence for intellectual and moral good. They not only created in many minds an interest in these works, but aroused the interest where it was latent, and gave it expression where it had hitherto found no voice. One fault, alone, could be charged against them; and this lay partly in the nature of all friendly concerted action: they stirred a spirit of enthusiasm in which it was not easy, under conditions equally genuine, to distinguish the individual element from that which was due to contagion; while the presence among us of the still living poet often infused into that enthusiasm a vaguely emotional element, which otherwise detracted

from its intellectual worth. But in so far as this was a drawback to the intended action of the Societies, it was one only in the most negative sense; nor can we doubt that, to a certain extent, Mr. Browning's best influence was promoted by it. The hysterical sensibilities which, for some years past, he had unconsciously but not unfrequently aroused in the minds of women, and even of men, were a morbid development of that influence, which its open and systematic extension tended rather to diminish than to increase.

It is also a matter of history that Robert Browning had many deep and constant admirers in England, and still more in America,[1] long before this organized interest had developed itself. Letters received from often remote parts of the United States had been for many years a detail of his daily experience; and even when they consisted of the request for an autograph, an application to print se-

[1] The cheapening of his works in America, induced by the absence of international copyright, accounts of course in some degree for their wider diffusion, and hence earlier appreciation there.

lections from his works, or a mere expression of schoolboy pertness or schoolgirl sentimentality, they bore witness to his wide reputation in that country, and the high esteem in which he was held there.[1] The names of Levi and Celia Thaxter of Boston had long, I believe, been conspicuous in the higher ranks of his disciples, though they first occur in his correspondence at about this date. I trust I may take for granted Mrs. Thaxter's permission to publish a letter from her.

NEWTONVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS,
March 14, 1880.

MY DEAR MR. BROWNING, — Your note reached me this morning, but it belonged to my husband, for it was he who wrote to you; so I gave it to him, glad to put into his hands so precious a piece of manuscript, for he has for you and all your work an enthusiastic appreciation such as is seldom found on this planet: it is not possible that the admiration of one mortal for another can exceed his feeling for you. You might have written for him,

[1] One of the most curious proofs of this was the Californian Railway time-table edition of his poems.

I 've a friend over the sea,

. . . . . .

It all grew out of the books I write, etc.

You should see his fine wrath and scorn for the idiocy that does n't at once comprehend you!

He knows every word you have ever written; long ago "Sordello" was an open book to him from title-page to closing line, and *all* you have printed since has been as eagerly and studiously devoured. He reads you aloud (and his reading is a fine art) to crowds of astonished people, he swears by you, he thinks no one save Shakespeare has a right to be mentioned in the same century with you. You are the great enthusiasm of his life.

Pardon me, you are smiling, I dare say. You hear any amount of such things, doubtless. But a genuine living appreciation is always worth having in this old world, it is like a strong fresh breeze from off the brine, that puts a sense of life and power into a man. You cannot be the worse for it.

Yours very sincerely,

CELIA THAXTER.

When Mr. Thaxter died, in February, 1885, his son wrote to Mr. Browning to beg of him a few lines to be inscribed on his father's tombstone. The little poem by which the request was answered has not yet, I believe, been published.

Written to be inscribed on the gravestone of Levi Thaxter.

Thou, whom these eyes saw never, — say friends true
Who say my soul, helped onward by my song,
Though all unwittingly, has helped thee too ?
I gave but of the little that I knew :
How were the gift requited, while along
Life's path I pace, could'st thou make weakness strong,
Help me with knowledge — for Life 's old, Death 's new !

R. B.

April 19, 1885.

A publication which connected itself with the labors of the Society, without being directly inspired by it, was the annotated "Strafford" prepared by Miss Hickey for the use of students. It may be agreeable to those who use the little work to know the estimate in which Mr. Browning held it. He wrote as follows :

19 Warwick Crescent, W.,
February 15, 1884.

Dear Miss Hickey, — I have returned the proofs by post, — nothing can be better than

your notes — and with a real wish to be of use, I read them carefully that I might detect never so tiny a fault — but I found none — unless (to show you how minutely I searched), it should be one that by "thriving in your contempt," I meant simply "while you despise them, and for all that, they thrive and are powerful to do you harm." The idiom you prefer — quite an authorized one — comes to much the same thing after all.

You must know how much I grieve at your illness — temporary as I will trust it to be. I feel all your goodness to me — or whatever in my books may be taken for me — well, I wish you knew how thoroughly I feel it — and how truly I am and shall ever be

Yours affectionately,

ROBERT BROWNING.

From the time of the foundation of the New Shakspere Society, Mr. Browning was its president. In 1880 he became a member of the Wordsworth Society. Two interesting letters to Professor Knight, dated respectively

1880 and 1887, connect themselves with the working of the latter; and, in spite of their distance in time, may therefore be given together. The poem which formed the subject of the first was "The Daisy;" [1] the selection referred to in the second was that made in 1888 by Professor Knight for the Wordsworth Society, with the coöperation of Mr. Browning and other eminent literary men.

19 Warwick Crescent, W.,
July 9, 1880.

My dear Sir, — You pay me a compliment in caring for my opinion — but, such as it is, a very decided one it must be. On every account, your method of giving the original text, and subjoining in a note the variations, each with its proper date, is incontestably preferable to any other. It would be so, if the variations were even improvements — there would be pleasure as well as profit in seeing what was good grow visibly better. But — to confine ourselves to the single "proof" you

[1] That beginning "In youth from rock to rock, I went."

have sent me — in every case the change is sadly for the worse: I am quite troubled by such spoilings of passage after passage as I should have chuckled at had I chanced upon them in some copy pencil-marked with corrections by Jeffrey or Gifford: indeed, they are nearly as wretched as the touchings-up of the "Siege of Corinth" by the latter. If ever diabolic agency was caught at tricks with "apostolic" achievement (see page 9) — and "apostolic," with no "profanity" at all, I esteem these poems to be — surely you may bid it "aroint" "about and all about" these desecrated stanzas — each of which, however, thanks to your piety, we may hail, I trust, with a hearty

> Thy long-lost praise thou shalt regain
> Nor be less dear to future men
> Than in old time!

Believe me, my dear sir,

Yours very sincerely,

ROBERT BROWNING.

19 Warwick Crescent, W.,
March 23, 1887.

Dear Professor Knight, — I have seemed to neglect your commission shamefully enough: but I confess to a sort of repugnance to classifying the poems as even good and less good: because in my heart I fear I should do it almost chronologically — so immeasurably superior seem to me the "first sprightly runnings." Your selection would appear to be excellent; and the partial admittance of the later work prevents one from observing the too definitely distinguishing black line between supremely good and — well, what is fairly tolerable — from Wordsworth, always understand! I have marked a few of the early poems, not included in your list — I could do no other when my conscience tells me that I never can be tired of loving them: while, with the best will in the world, I could never do more than try hard to like them.[1]

[1] By "them" Mr. Browning clearly means the later poems, and probably has omitted a few words which would have shown this.

You see, I go wholly upon my individual likings and distastes: that other considerations should have their weight with other people is natural and inevitable.

Ever truly yours,

ROBERT BROWNING.

Many thanks for the volume just received — that with the correspondence. I hope that you restore the swan simile so ruthlessly cut away from "Dion."

In 1884 he was again invited, and again declined, to stand for the Lord Rectorship of the University of St. Andrews. In the same year he received the LL. D. degree of the University of Edinburgh; and in the following was made Honorary President of the Associated Societies of that city.[1] During the few days spent there on the occasion of his investiture, he was the guest of Professor

[1] This Association was instituted in 1833, and is a union of literary and debating societies. It is at present composed of five: the Dialectic, Scots Law, Diagnostic, Philosophical, and Philomathic.

Masson, whose solicitous kindness to him is still warmly remembered in the family.

The interest in Mr. Browning as a poet is beginning to spread in Germany. There is room for wonder that it should not have done so before, though the affinities of his genius are rather with the older than with the more modern German mind. It is much more remarkable that, many years ago, his work had already a sympathetic exponent in Italy. Signor Nencioni, Professor of Literature in Florence, had made his acquaintance at Siena, and was possibly first attracted to him through his wife, although I never heard that it was so. He was soon, however, fascinated by Mr. Browning's poetry, and made it an object of serious study; he largely quoted from, and wrote on it, in the Roman paper "Fanfulla della Domenica," in 1881 and 1882; and published last winter what is, I am told, an excellent article on the same subject, in the "Nuova Antologia." Two years ago he traveled from Rome to Venice (accompanied by Signor Placci), for the purpose of seeing him.

He is fond of reciting passages from the works, and has even made attempts at translation: though he understands them too well not to pronounce them, what they are for every Latin language, untranslatable.

In 1883 Mr. Browning added another link to the "golden" chain of verse which united England and Italy. A statue of Goldoni was about to be erected in Venice. The ceremonies of the occasion were to include the appearance of a volume — or album — of appropriate poems; and Cavaliere Molmenti, its intending editor, a leading member of the "Erection Committee," begged Mr. Browning to contribute to it. It was also desired that he should be present at the unveiling.[1] He was unable to grant this request, but consented to write a poem. This sonnet to Goldoni also deserves to be more widely known, both for itself and for the manner of its pro-

[1] It was, I think, during this visit to Venice that he assisted at a no less interesting ceremony: the unveiling of a commemorative tablet to Baldassaro Galuppi, in his native island of Burano.

duction. Mr. Browning had forgotten, or not understood, how soon the promise concerning it must be fulfilled, and it was actually scribbled off while a messenger, sent by Signor Molmenti, waited for it.

Goldoni, — good, gay, sunniest of souls, —
Glassing half Venice in that verse of thine, —
What though it just reflect the shade and shine
Of common life, nor render, as it rolls,
Grandeur and gloom? Sufficient for thy shoals
Was Carnival: Parini's depths enshrine
Secrets unsuited to that opaline
Surface of things which laughs along thy scrolls.
There throng the people: how they come and go,
Lisp the soft language, flaunt the bright garb, — see, —
On Piazza, Calle, under Portico
And over Bridge! Dear king of Comedy,
Be honored! Thou that didst love Venice so,
Venice, and we who love her, all love thee!

VENICE, *November* 27, 1883.

A complete bibliography would take account of three other sonnets, "The Founder of the Feast," 1884, "The Names," 1884, and "Why I am a Liberal," 1886, to which I shall have occasion to refer; but we decline insensibly from these on to the less important

or more fugitive productions which such lists also include, and on which it is unnecessary or undesirable that any stress should be laid.

In 1885 he was joined in Venice by his son. It was "Penini's" first return to the country of his birth, his first experience of the city which he had only visited in his nurse's arms; and his delight in it was so great that the plan shaped itself in his father's mind of buying a house there, which should serve as *pied-à-terre* for the family, but more especially as a home for him. Neither the health nor the energies of the younger Mr. Browning had ever withstood the influence of the London climate; a foreign element was undoubtedly present in his otherwise thoroughly English constitution. Everything now pointed to his settling in Italy, and pursuing his artist life there, only interrupting it by occasional visits to London and Paris. His father entered into negotiations for the Palazzo Manzoni, next door to the former Hôtel de l'Univers; and the pur-

chase was completed, so far as he was concerned, before he returned to England. The fact is related, and his own position towards it described in a letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow, written from Venice.

PALAZZO GIUSTINIANI RECANATI, S. MOÏSE,
November 15, 1885.

My two dear friends will have supposed, with plenty of reason, that I never got the kind letter some weeks ago. When it came, I was in the middle of an affair, conducted by letters of quite another kind, with people abroad: and as I fancied that every next day might bring me news very interesting to me and likely to be worth telling to the dear friends, I waited and waited — and only two days since did the matter come to a satisfactory conclusion — so, as the Irish song has it, "Open your eyes and die with surprise" when I inform you that I have purchased the Manzoni Palace here, on the Canal Grande, of its owner, Marchese Montecucculi, an Austrian and an absentee — hence the delay

of communication. I did this purely for Pen — who became at once simply infatuated with the city which won my whole heart long before he was born or thought of. I secure him a perfect domicile, every facility for his painting and sculpture, and a property fairly worth, even here and now, double what I gave for it — such is the virtue in these parts of ready money! I myself shall stick to London — which has been so eminently good and gracious to me — so long as God permits; only, when the inevitable outrage of Time gets the better of my body — (I shall not believe in his reaching my soul and proper self) — there will be a capital retreat provided: and meantime I shall be able to "take mine ease in mine own inn" whenever so minded. There, my dear friends! I trust now to be able to leave very shortly; the main business cannot be formally concluded before two months at least — through the absence of the Marchese — who left at once to return to his duties as commander of an Austrian ship; but the necessary engagement

to sell and buy at a specified price is made in due legal form, and the papers will be sent to me in London for signature. I hope to get away the week after next at latest — spite of the weather in England which to-day's letters report as "atrocious" — and ours, though variable, is in the main very tolerable and sometimes perfect; for all that, I yearn to be at home in poor Warwick Crescent, which must do its best to make me forget my new abode. I forget you don't know Venice. Well, then, the Palazzo Manzoni is situate on the Grand Canal, and is described by Ruskin — to give no other authority — as "a perfect and very rich example of Byzantine Renaissance: its warm yellow marbles are magnificent." And again — "an exquisite example (of Byzantine Renaissance) as applied to domestic architecture." So testify the "Stones of Venice." But we will talk about the place, over a photograph, when I am happy enough to be with you again.

Of Venetian gossip there is next to none. We had an admirable Venetian Company —

using the dialect — at the Goldoni Theatre. The acting of Zago, in his various parts, and Zenon-Palladini, in her especial character of a Venetian piece of volubility and impulsiveness in the shape of a servant, were admirable indeed. The manager, Gallina, is a playwright of much reputation, and gave us some dozen of his own pieces, mostly good and clever. S. is very well, — much improved in health: we walk sufficiently in this city, where walking is accounted impossible by those who never attempt it. Have I tired your good temper? No! you ever wished me well, and I love you both with my whole heart. S.'s love goes with mine — who am ever yours,

ROBERT BROWNING.

He never, however, owned the Manzoni Palace. The Austrian gentlemen [1] whose property it was, put forward, at the last moment, unexpected and to his mind unreasonable claims; and he was preparing to contest the position, when a timely warning induced him

[1] Two or three brothers.

to withdraw from it altogether. The warning proceeded from his son, who had remained on the spot, and was now informed on competent authority that the foundations of the house were insecure.

In the early summer of 1884, and again in 1886, Miss Browning had a serious illness; and though she recovered, in each case completely, and in the first rapidly, it was considered desirable that she should not travel so far as usual from home. She and her brother therefore accepted for the August and September of 1884 the urgent invitation of an American friend, Mrs. Bloomfield Moore, to stay with her at a villa which she rented for some seasons at St. Moritz. Mr. Browning was delighted with the Engadine, where the circumstances of his abode, and the thoughtful kindness of his hostess, allowed him to enjoy the benefits of comparative civilization together with almost perfect repose. The weather that year was brilliant until the end of September, if not beyond it; and his letters tell the old pleasant story of long daily

walks and a general sense of invigoration. One of these, written to Mr. and Mrs. Skirrow, also contains some pungent remarks on contemporary events, with an affectionate allusion to one of the chief actors in them.

"Anyhow, I have the sincerest hope that Wolseley may get done as soon, and kill as few people, as possible — keeping himself safe and sound — brave dear fellow — for the benefit of us all."

He also speaks with great sympathy of the death of Mr. Charles Sartoris, which had just taken place at St. Moritz.

In 1886, Miss Browning was not allowed to leave England; and she and Mr. Browning established themselves for the autumn at the Hand Hotel at Llangollen, where their old friends, Sir Theodore and Lady Martin, would be within easy reach. Mr. Browning missed the exhilarating effects of the Alpine air; but he enjoyed the peaceful beauty of the Welsh valley, and the quiet and comfort of the old-fashioned English inn. A new source of interest also presented itself to him in some aspects of

the life of the English country gentleman. He was struck by the improvements effected by its actual owner [1] on a neighboring estate, and by the provisions contained in them for the comfort of both the men and the animals under his care; and he afterwards made, in reference to them, what was for a professing Liberal a very striking remark: "Talk of abolishing that class of men! They are the salt of the earth!" Every Sunday afternoon he and his sister drank tea — weather permitting — on the lawn with their friends at Brintysilio; and he alludes gracefully to these meetings in a letter written in the early summer of 1888, when Lady Martin had urged him to return to Wales.

The poet left another and more pathetic remembrance of himself in the neighborhood of Llangollen: his weekly presence at the afternoon Sunday service in the parish church of Llantysilio. Churchgoing was, as I have said, no part of his regular life. It was no part of his life in London. But I do not think he ever

[1] I believe a Captain Best.

failed in it at the Universities or in the country. The assembling for prayer meant for him something deeper in both the religious and the human sense, where ancient learning and piety breathed through the consecrated edifice, or where only the figurative "two or three" were "gathered together" within it. A memorial tablet now marks the spot at which on this occasion the sweet grave face and the venerable head were so often seen. It has been placed by the direction of Lady Martin on the adjoining wall.

It was in the September of this year that Mr. Browning heard of the death of M. Joseph Milsand. This name represented for him one of the few close friendships which were to remain until the end, unclouded in fact and in remembrance; and although some weight may be given to those circumstances of their lives which precluded all possibility of friction and risk of disenchantment, I believe their rooted sympathy, and Mr. Browning's unfailing powers of appreciation would, in all possible cases, have maintained the bond

intact. The event was at the last sudden, but happily not quite unexpected.

Many other friends had passed by this time out of the poet's life — those of a younger, as well as his own and an older generation. Miss Haworth died in 1883. Charles Dickens, with whom he had remained on the most cordial terms, had walked between him and his son at Thackeray's funeral, to receive from him, only seven years later, the same pious office. Lady Augusta Stanley, the daughter of his old friend, Lady Elgin, was dead, and her husband, the Dean of Westminster. So also were "Barry Cornwall" and John Forster, Alfred Domett and Thomas Carlyle, Mr. Cholmondeley and Lord Houghton; others still, both men and women, whose love for him might entitle them to a place in his Biography, but whom I could at most only mention by name.

For none of these can his feeling have been more constant or more disinterested than that which bound him to Carlyle. He visited him at Chelsea in the last weary days of his long life, as often as their distance from each other

and his own engagements allowed. Even the man's posthumous self-disclosures scarcely availed to destroy the affectionate reverence which he had always felt for him. He never ceased to defend him against the charge of unkindness to his wife, or to believe that in the matter of their domestic unhappiness she was the more responsible of the two.[1] Yet Carlyle had never rendered him that service, easy as it appears, which one man of letters most justly values from another: that of proclaiming the admiration which he privately expresses for his works. The fact was incomprehensible to Mr. Browning — it was so foreign to his own nature; and he commented on it with a touch, though merely a touch, of bit-

[1] He always thought her a hard and unlovable woman, and I believe little liking was lost between them. He told a comical story of how he had once, unintentionally but rather stupidly, annoyed her. She had asked him, as he was standing by her tea-table, to put the kettle back on the fire. He took it out of her hands, but, preoccupied by the conversation he was carrying on, deposited it on the hearth-rug. It was some time before he could be made to see that this was wrong; and he believed Mrs. Carlyle never ceased to think that he had a mischievous motive for doing it.

terness, when repeating to a friend some almost extravagant eulogium which in earlier days he had received from him *tête-à-tête*. "If only," he said, "those words had been ever repeated in public, what good they might have done me!"

In the spring of 1886 he accepted the post of Foreign Correspondent to the Royal Academy, rendered vacant by the death of Lord Houghton. He had long been on very friendly terms with the leading Academicians, and a constant guest at the Banquet; and his fitness for the office admitted of no doubt. But his nomination by the President and the manner in which it was ratified by the Council and general body gave him sincere pleasure.

Early in 1887 the "Parleyings" appeared. Their author is still the same Robert Browning, though here and there visibly touched by the hand of time. Passages of sweet or majestic music, or of exquisite fancy, alternate with its long stretches of argumentative thought; and the light of imagination still plays, however fitfully, over statements of

opinion to which constant repetition has given a suggestion of commonplace. But the revision of the work caused him unusual trouble. The subjects he had chosen strained his powers of exposition; and I think he often tried to remedy by mere verbal correction what was a defect in the logical arrangement of his ideas. They would slide into each other where a visible dividing line was required. The last stage of his life was now at hand; and the vivid return of fancy to his boyhood's literary loves was in pathetic, perhaps not quite accidental coincidence with the fact. It will be well to pause at this beginning of his decline, and recall so far as possible the image of the man who lived, and worked, and loved, and was loved among us, during that brief old age, and the lengthened period of level strength which had preceded it. The record already given of his life and work supplies the outline of the picture; but a few more personal details are required for its completion.

CHAPTER XX.

Constancy to Habit. — Optimism. — Belief in Providence. — Political Opinions. — His Friendships. — Reverence for Genius. — Attitude towards his Public. — Attitude towards his Work. — Habits of Work. — His Reading. — Conversational Powers. — Impulsiveness and Reserve. — Nervous Peculiarities. — His Benevolence. — His Attitude towards Women.

When Mr. Browning wrote to Miss Haworth, in the July of 1861, he had said: "I shall still grow, I hope; but my root is taken, and remains." He was then alluding to a special offshoot of feeling and association, on the permanence of which it is not now necessary to dwell; but it is certain that he continued growing up to a late age, and that the development was only limited by those general roots, those fixed conditions of his being, which had predetermined its form. This progressive intellectual vitality is amply represented in his works; it also reveals itself in

his letters in so far as I have been allowed to publish them. I only refer to it to give emphasis to a contrasted or corresponding characteristic: his aversion to every thought of change. I have spoken of his constancy to all degrees of friendship and love. What he loved once he loved always, from the dearest man or woman to whom his allegiance had been given to the humblest piece of furniture which had served him. It was equally true that what he had done once he was wont, for that very reason, to continue doing. The devotion to habits of feeling extended to habits of life; and although the lower constancy generally served the purposes of the higher, it also sometimes clashed with them. It conspired with his ready kindness of heart to make him subject to circumstances which at first appealed to him through that kindness, but lay really beyond its scope. This statement, it is true, can only fully apply to the latter part of his life. His powers of reaction must originally have been stronger, as well as freer from the paralysis of conflicting motive

and interest. The marked shrinking from effort in any untried direction, which was often another name for his stability, could scarcely have coexisted with the fresher and more curious interest in men and things; we know indeed from recorded facts that it was a feeling of later growth; and it visibly increased with the periodical nervous exhaustion of his advancing years. I am convinced, nevertheless, that, when the restiveness of boyhood had passed away, Mr. Browning's strength was always more passive than active; that he habitually made the best of external conditions rather than tried to change them. He was a "fighter" only by the brain. And on this point, though on this only, his work is misleading.

The acquiescent tendency arose in some degree from two equally prominent characteristics of Mr. Browning's nature: his optimism, and his belief in direct Providence; and these again represented a condition of mind which was in certain respects a quality, but must in others be recognized as a defect. It disposed

him too much to make a virtue of happiness. It tended also to the ignoring or denying of many incidental possibilities, and many standing problems of human suffering. The first part of this assertion is illustrated by "The Two Poets of Croisic," in which Mr. Browning declares that, other conditions being equal, the greater poet will have been he who led the happier life, who most completely — and we must take this in the human as well as religious sense — triumphed over suffering. The second has its proof in the contempt for poetic melancholy which flashes from the supposed utterance of Shakespeare in "At the Mermaid;" its negative justification in the whole range of his work.

Such facts may be hard to reconcile with others already known of Mr. Browning's nature, or already stated concerning it; but it is in the depths of that nature that the solution of this, as of more than one other anomaly, must be sought. It is true that remembered pain dwelt longer with him than remembered pleasure. It is true that the last

great sorrow of his life was long felt and cherished by him as a religion, and that it entered as such into the courage with which he first confronted it. It is no less true that he directly and increasingly cultivated happiness; and that because of certain sufferings which had been connected with them, he would often have refused to live his happiest days again.

It seems still harder to associate defective human sympathy with his kind heart and large dramatic imagination, though that very imagination was an important factor in the case. It forbade the collective and mathematical estimate of human suffering, which is so much in favor with modern philanthropy, and so untrue a measure for the individual life; and he indirectly condemns it in "Ferishtah's Fancies" in the parable of "Bean Stripes." But his dominant individuality also barred the recognition of any judgment or impression, any thought or feeling, which did not justify itself from his own point of view. The barrier would melt under the influence of a sympathetic mood, as it would stiffen in the

atmosphere of disagreement. It would yield, as did in his case so many other things, to continued indirect pressure, whether from his love of justice, the strength of his attachments, or his power of imaginative absorption. But he was bound by the conditions of an essentially creative nature. The subjectiveness, if I may for once use that hackneyed word, had passed out of his work only to root itself more strongly in his life. He was self-centred, as the creative nature must inevitably be. He appeared, for this reason, more widely sympathetic in his works than in his life, though even in the former certain grounds of vicarious feeling remained untouched. The sympathy there displayed was creative and obeyed its own law. That which was demanded from him by reality was responsive, and implied submission to the law of other minds.

Such intellectual egotism is unconnected with moral selfishness, though it often unconsciously does its work. Were it otherwise, I should have passed over in silence this aspect,

comprehensive though it is, of Mr. Browning's character. He was capable of the largest self-sacrifice and of the smallest self-denial; and would exercise either whenever love or duty clearly pointed the way. He would, he believed, cheerfully have done so at the command, however arbitrary, of a Higher Power; he often spoke of the absence of such injunction, whether to endurance or action, as the great theoretical difficulty of life for those who, like himself, rejected or questioned the dogmatic teachings of Christianity. This does not mean that he ignored the traditional moralities which have so largely taken their place. They coincided in great measure with his own instincts; and few occasions could have arisen in which they would not be to him a sufficient guide. I may add, though this is a digression, that he never admitted the right of genius to defy them; when such a right had once been claimed for it in his presence, he rejoined quickly, "That is an error! *Noblesse oblige.*" But he had difficulty in acknowledging any abstract law which did not derive

from a Higher Power; and this fact may have been at once cause and consequence of the special conditions of his own mind. All human or conventional obligation appeals finally to the individual judgment; and in his case this could easily be obscured by the always militant imagination, in regard to any subject in which his feelings were even indirectly concerned. No one saw more justly than he, when the object of vision was general or remote. Whatever entered his personal atmosphere encountered a refracting medium in which objects were decomposed, and a succession of details, each held as it were close to the eye, blocked out the larger view.

We have seen, on the other hand, that he accepted imperfect knowledge as part of the discipline of experience. It detracted in no sense from his conviction of direct relations with the Creator. This was indeed the central fact of his theology, as the absolute individual existence had been the central fact of his metaphysics; and when he described the fatal leap in "Red Cotton Nightcap Country" as a

frantic appeal to the Higher Powers for the "sign" which the man's religion did not afford, and his nature could not supply, a special dramatic sympathy was at work within him. The third part of the epilogue to "Dramatis Personæ" represented his own creed; though this was often accentuated in the sense of a more personal privilege, and a perhaps less poetic mystery, than the poem conveys. The Evangelical Christian and the subjective idealist philosopher were curiously blended in his composition.

The transition seems violent from this old-world religion to any system of politics applicable to the present day. They were, nevertheless, closely allied in Mr. Browning's mind. His politics were, so far as they went, the practical aspect of his religion. Their cardinal doctrine was the liberty of individual growth; removal of every barrier of prejudice or convention by which it might still be checked. He had been a Radical in youth, and probably in early manhood; he remained, in the truest sense of the word, a Liberal;

and his position as such was defined in the sonnet prefixed in 1886 to Mr. Andrew Reid's essay, "Why I am a Liberal," and bearing the same name. Its profession of faith did not, however, necessarily bind him to any political party. It separated him from all the newest developments of so-called Liberalism. He respected the rights of property. He was a true patriot, hating to see his country plunged into aggressive wars, but tenacious of her position among the empires of the world. He was also a passionate Unionist; although the question of our political relations with Ireland weighed less with him, as it has done with so many others, than those considerations of law and order, of honesty and humanity, which have been trampled under foot in the name of Home Rule. It grieved and surprised him to find himself on this subject at issue with so many valued friends; and no pain of Lost Leadership was ever more angry or more intense, than that which came to him through the defection of a great statesman whom he had honored and loved, from what he believed to be the right cause.

The character of Mr. Browning's friendships reveals itself in great measure in even a simple outline of his life. His first friends of his own sex were almost exclusively men of letters, by taste if not by profession; the circumstances of his entrance into society made this a matter of course. In later years he associated on cordial terms with men of very various interests and professions; and only writers of conspicuous merit, whether in prose or poetry, attracted him as such. No intercourse was more congenial to him than that of the higher class of English clergymen. He sympathized in their beliefs even when he did not share them. Above all he loved their culture; and the love of culture in general, of its old classic forms in particular, was as strong in him as if it had been formed by all the natural and conventional associations of a university career. He had hearty friends and appreciators among the dignitaries of the Church — successive Archbishops and Bishops, Deans of Westminster and St. Paul's. They all knew the value of the great free-

lance who fought like the gods of old with the regular army. No name, however, has been mentioned in the poet's family more frequently or with more affection than that of the Rev. J. D. W. Williams, Vicar of Bottisham in Cambridgeshire. The mutual acquaintance, which was made through Mr. Browning's brother-in-law, Mr. George Moulton-Barrett, was prepared by Mr. Williams's great love for his poems, of which he translated many into Latin and Greek; but I am convinced that Mr. Browning's delight in his friend's classical attainments was quite as great as his gratification in the tribute he himself derived from them.

His love of genius was a worship: and in this we must include his whole life. Nor was it, as this feeling so often is, exclusively exercised upon the past. I do not suppose his more eminent contemporaries ever quite knew how generous his enthusiasm for them had been, how free from any undercurrent of envy, or impulse to avoidable criticism. He could not endure even just censure of

one whom he believed, or had believed, to be great. I have seen him wince under it, though no third person was present, and heard him answer, "Don't! don't!" as if physical pain were being inflicted on him. In the early days he would make his friend, M. de Monclar, draw for him from memory the likenesses of famous writers whom he had known in Paris; the sketches thus made of George Sand and Victor Hugo are still in the poet's family. A still more striking and very touching incident refers to one of the winters, probably the second, which he spent in Paris. He was one day walking with little Pen, when Béranger came in sight, and he bade the child "run up to" or "run past that gentleman, and put his hand for a moment upon him." This was a great man, he afterwards explained, and he wished his son to be able by and by to say that if he had not known, he had at all events touched him. Scientific genius ranked with him only second to the poetical.

Mr. Browning's delicate professional sym-

pathies justified some sensitiveness on his own account; but he was, I am convinced, as free from this quality as a man with a poet-nature could possibly be. It may seem hazardous to conjecture how serious criticism would have affected him. Few men so much "reviewed" have experienced so little. He was by turns derided or ignored, enthusiastically praised, zealously analyzed and interpreted: but the independent judgment which could embrace at once the quality of his mind and its defects is almost absent — has been so at all events during later years — from the volumes which have been written about him. I am convinced, nevertheless, that he would have accepted serious, even adverse criticism, if it had borne the impress of unbiased thought and genuine sincerity. It could not be otherwise with one in whom the power of reverence was so strongly marked.

He asked but one thing of his reviewers, as he asked but one thing of his larger public. The first demand is indicated in a letter to Mrs. Frank Hill, of January 31, 1884.

DEAR MRS. HILL, — Could you befriend me? The "Century" prints a little insignificance of mine — an impromptu sonnet — but prints it *correctly*. The "Pall Mall" pleases to extract it — and produces what I inclose: one line left out, and a note of admiration (!) turned into an I, and a superfluous "the" stuck in — all these blunders with the correctly printed text before it! So does the charge of unintelligibility attach itself to your poor friend — who can kick nobody. ROBERT BROWNING.

The carelessness often shown in the most friendly quotation could hardly be absent from that which was intended to support a hostile view; and the only injustice of which he ever complained was what he spoke of as falsely condemning him out of his own mouth. He used to say: "If a critic declares that any poem of mine is unintelligible, the reader may go to it and judge for himself; but if it is made to appear unintelligible by a passage extracted from it and distorted by misprints,

I have no redress." He also failed to realize those conditions of thought, and still more of expression, which made him often on first reading difficult to understand; and as the younger generation of his admirers often deny those difficulties where they exist, as emphatically as their grandfathers proclaimed them where they did not, public opinion gave him little help in the matter.

The second (unspoken) request was in some sense an antithesis to the first. Mr. Browning desired to be read accurately but not literally. He deprecated the constant habit of reading him into his work; whether in search of the personal meaning of a given passage or poem, or in the light of a foregone conclusion as to what that meaning must be. The latter process was that generally preferred, because the individual mind naturally seeks its own reflection in the poet's work, as it does in the facts of nature. It was stimulated by the investigations of the Browning Societies, and by the partial familiarity with his actual life which constantly supplied tempting, if un-

trustworthy clues. It grew out of the strong personal as well as literary interest which he inspired. But the tendency to listen in his work for a single recurrent note always struck him as analogous to the inspection of a picture gallery with eyes blind to every color but one; and the act of sympathy often involved in this mode of judgment was neutralized for him by the limitation of his genius which it presupposed. His general objection to being identified with his works is set forth in "At the Mermaid," and other poems of the same volume, in which it takes the form of a rather captious protest against inferring from the poet any habit or quality of the man; and where also, under the impulse of the dramatic mood, he enforces the lesson by saying more than he can possibly mean. His readers might object that his human personality was so often plainly revealed in his poetic utterance (whether or not that of Shakespeare was), and so often also avowed by it, that the line which divided them became impossible to draw. But he again would have rejoined that the poet

could never express himself with any large freedom, unless a fiction of impersonality were granted to him. He might also have alleged, he often did allege, that in his case the fiction would hold a great deal of truth; since, except in the rarest cases, the very fact of poetic, above all of dramatic reproduction, detracts from the reality of the thought or feeling reproduced. It introduces the alloy of fancy without which the fixed outlines of even living experience cannot be welded into poetic form. He claimed, in short, that in judging of his work, one should allow for the action in it of the constructive imagination, in the exercise of which all deeper poetry consists. The form of literalism, which showed itself in seeking historical authority for every character or incident which he employed by way of illustration, was especially irritating to him.

I may (as indeed I must) concede this much, without impugning either the pleasure or the gratitude with which he recognized the increasing interest in his poems, and, if some-

times exhibited in a mistaken form, the growing appreciation of them.

There was another and more striking peculiarity in Mr. Browning's attitude towards his works: his constant conviction that the latest must be the best, because the outcome of the fullest mental experience, and of the longest practice in his art. He was keenly alive to the necessary failings of youthful literary production; he also practically denied to it that quality which so often places it at an advantage over that, not indeed of more mature manhood, but at all events of advancing age. There was much in his own experience to blind him to the natural effects of time; it had been a prolonged triumph over them. But the delusion, in so far as it was one, lay deeper than the testimony of such experience, and would, I think, have survived it. It was the essence of his belief that the mind is superior to physical change; that it may be helped or hindered by its temporary alliance with the body, but will none the less outstrip it in their joint course; and as intellect was

for him the life of poetry, so was the power of poetry independent of bodily progress and bodily decline. This conviction pervaded his life. He learned, though happily very late, to feel age an impediment; he never accepted it as a disqualification.

He finished his work very carefully. He had the better right to resent any garbling of it, that this habitually took place through his punctuation, which was always made with the fullest sense of its significance to any but the baldest style, and of its special importance to his own. I have heard him say: "People accuse me of not taking pains! I take nothing *but* pains!" And there was indeed a curious contrast between the irresponsible, often strangely unquestioned, impulse to which the substance of each poem was due, and the conscientious labor which he always devoted to its form. The laborious habit must have grown upon him; it was natural that it should do so as thought gained the ascendency over emotion in what he had to say. Mrs. Browning told Mr. Val Prinsep that her husband "worked

at a great rate;" and this fact probably connected itself with the difficulty he then found in altering the form or wording of any particular phrase; he wrote most frequently under that lyrical inspiration in which the idea and the form are least separable from each other. We know, however, that in the later editions of his old work he always corrected where he could; and if we notice the changed lines in "Paracelsus" or "Sordello," as they appear in the edition of 1863, or the slighter alterations indicated for the last reprint of his works, we are struck by the care evinced in them for greater smoothness of expression, as well as for greater accuracy and force.

He produced less rapidly in later life, though he could throw off impromptu verses, whether serious or comical, with the utmost ease. His work was then of a kind which required more deliberation; and other claims had multiplied upon his time and thoughts. He was glad to have accomplished twenty or thirty lines in a morning. After lunch-time, for many years, he avoided, when possible,

even answering a note. But he always counted a day lost on which he had not written something; and in those last years on which we have yet to enter, he complained bitterly of the quantity of ephemeral correspondence which kept him back from his proper work. He once wrote, on the occasion of a short illness which confined him to the house, "All my power of imagination seems gone. I might as well be in bed!" He repeatedly determined to write a poem every day, and once succeeded for a fortnight in doing so. He was then in Paris, preparing "Men and Women." "Childe Roland" and "Women and Roses" were among those produced on this plan; the latter having been suggested by some flowers sent to his wife. The lyrics in "Ferishtah's Fancies" were written, I believe, on consecutive days; and the intention renewed itself with his last work, though it cannot have been maintained.

He was not as great a reader in later as in earlier years; he had neither time nor available strength to be so if he had wished; and

he absorbed almost unconsciously every item which added itself to the sum of general knowledge. Books had indeed served for him their most important purpose when they had satisfied the first curiosities of his genius, and enabled it to establish its independence. His mind was made up on the chief subjects of contemporary thought, and what was novel or controversial in its proceeding had no attraction for him. He would read anything, short of an English novel, to a friend whose eyes required this assistance; but such pleasure as he derived from the act was more often sympathetic than spontaneous, even when he had not, as he often had, selected for it a book which he already knew. In the course of his last decade he devoted himself for a short time to the study of Spanish and Hebrew. The Spanish dramatists yielded him a fund of new enjoyment; and he delighted in his power of reading Hebrew in its most difficult printed forms. He also tried, but with less result, to improve his knowledge of German. His eyesight defied all obstacles of bad paper and ancient

type, and there was anxiety as well as pleasure to those about him in his unfailing confidence in its powers. He never wore spectacles, nor had the least consciousness of requiring them. He would read an old closely printed volume by the waning light of a winter afternoon, positively refusing to use a lamp. Indeed, his preference of the faintest natural light to the best that could be artificially produced was perhaps the one suggestion of coming change. He used for all purposes a single eye; for the two did not combine in their action, the right serving exclusively for near, the left for distant objects. This was why in walking he often closed the right eye; while it was indispensable to his comfort in reading, not only that the light should come from the right side, but that the left should be shielded from any luminous object, like the fire, which even at the distance of half the length of a room would strike on his field of vision and confuse the near sight.

His literary interest became increasingly centred on records of the lives of men and

women; especially of such men and women as he had known; he was generally curious to see the newly published biographies, though often disappointed by them. He would also read, even for his amusement, good works of French or Italian fiction. His allegiance to Balzac remained unshaken, though he was conscious of lengthiness when he read him aloud. This author's deep and hence often poetic realism was, I believe, bound up with his own earliest aspirations towards dramatic art. His manner of reading aloud a story which he already knew was the counterpart of his own method of construction. He would claim his listener's attention for any apparently unimportant fact which had a part to play in it; he would say: "Listen to this description: it will be important. Observe this character: you will see a great deal more of him or her." We know that in his own work nothing was thrown away; no note was struck which did not add its vibration to the general utterance of the poem; and his habitual generosity towards a fellow-worker

prompted him to seek and recognize the same quality, even in productions where it was less conspicuous than in his own. The patient reading which he required for himself was justified by that which he always demanded for others; and he claimed it less in his own case for his possible intricacies of thought or style, than for that compactness of living structure in which every detail or group of details was essential to the whole, and in a certain sense contained it. He read few things with so much pleasure as an occasional chapter in the Old Testament.

Mr. Browning was a brilliant talker; he was admittedly more a talker than a conversationalist. But this quality had nothing in common with self-assertion or love of display. He had too much respect for the acquirements of other men to wish to impose silence on those who were competent to speak; and he had great pleasure in listening to a discussion on any subject in which he was interested, and on which he was not specially informed. He never willingly monopolized the conversa-

tion; but when called upon to take a prominent part in it, either with one person or with several, the flow of remembered knowledge and revived mental experience, combined with the ingenuous eagerness to vindicate some point in dispute, would often carry him away; while his hearers nearly as often allowed him to proceed from absence of any desire to interrupt him. This great mental fertility had been prepared by the wide reading and thorough assimilation of his early days; and it was only at a later, and in certain respects less vigorous period, that its full bearing could be seen. His memory for passing occurrences, even such as had impressed him, became very weak; it was so before he had grown really old; and he would urge this fact in deprecation of any want of kindness or sympathy which a given act of forgetfulness might seem to involve. He had probably always, in matters touching his own life, the memory of feelings more than that of facts. I think this has been described as a peculiarity of the poet-nature; and though

this memory is probably the more tenacious of the two, it is no safe guide to the recovery of facts, still less to that of their order and significance. Yet up to the last weeks, even the last conscious days of his life, his remembrance of historical incident, his aptness of literary illustration, never failed him. His dinner-table anecdotes supplied, of course, no measure for this spontaneous reproductive power; yet some weight must be given to the number of years during which he could abound in such stories, and attest their constant appropriateness by not repeating them.

This brilliant mental quality had its drawback, on which I have already touched in a rather different connection: the obstacle which it created to even serious and private conversation on any subject on which he was not neutral. Feeling, imagination, and the vividness of personal points of view constantly thwarted the attempt at a dispassionate exchange of ideas. But the balance often righted itself when the excitement of the discussion was at an end; and it would even

become apparent that expressions or arguments which he had passed over unheeded, or as it seemed unheard, had stored themselves in his mind and borne fruit there.

I think it is Mr. Sharp who has remarked that Mr. Browning combined impulsiveness of manner with much real reserve. He was habitually reticent where his deeper feelings were concerned; and the impulsiveness and the reticence were both equally rooted in his poetic and human temperament. The one meant the vital force of his emotions, the other their sensibility. In a smaller or more prosaic nature they must have modified each other. But the partial secretiveness had also occasionally its conscious motives, some unselfish, and some self-regarding; and from this point of view it stood in marked apparent antagonism to the more expansive quality. He never, however, intentionally withheld from others such things as it concerned them to know. His intellectual and religious convictions were open to all who seriously sought them; and if, even on such points, he did not

appear communicative, it was because he took more interest in any subject of conversation which did not directly centre in himself.

Setting aside the delicacies which tend to self-concealment, and for which he had been always more or less conspicuous; excepting also the pride which would coöperate with them, all his inclinations were in the direction of truth; there was no quality which he so much loved and admired. He thought aloud wherever he could trust himself to do so. Impulse predominated in all the active manifestations of his nature. The fiery child and the impatient boy had left their traces in the man; and with them the peculiar child-like quality which the man of genius never outgrows, and which, in its mingled waywardness and sweetness, was present in Robert Browning till almost his dying day. There was also a recurrent touch of hardness, distinct from the comparatively ungenial mood of his earlier years of widowhood; and this, like his reserve, seemed to conflict with his general character, but in reality harmonized

with it. It meant, not that feeling was suspended in him, but that it was compressed. It was his natural response to any opposition which his reasonings could not shake nor his will overcome, and which, rightly or not, conveyed to him the sense of being misunderstood. It reacted in pain for others, but it lay with an aching weight on his own heart, and was thrown off in an upheaval of the pent-up kindliness and affection, the moment their true springs were touched. The hardening power in his composition, though fugitive and comparatively seldom displayed, was in fact proportioned to his tenderness; and no one who had not seen him in the revulsion from a hard mood, or the regret for it, knew what that tenderness could be.

Underlying all the peculiarities of his nature, its strength and its weakness, its exuberance and its reserves, was the nervous excitability of which I have spoken in an earlier chapter. I have heard him say: "I am nervous to such a degree that I might fancy I could not enter a drawing-room, if I did not

know from long experience that I can do it." He did not desire to conceal this fact, nor need others conceal it for him; since it was only calculated to disarm criticism and to strengthen sympathy. The special vital power which he derived from this organization need not be reaffirmed. It carried also its inevitable disablements. Its resources were not always under his own control; and he frequently complained of the lack of presence of mind which would seize him on any conventional emergency not included in the daily social routine. In a real one he was never at fault. He never failed in a sympathetic response or a playful retort; he was always provided with the exact counter requisite in a game of words. In this respect indeed he had all the powers of the conversationalist; and the perfect ease and grace and geniality of his manner on such occasions arose probably far more from his innate human and social qualities than from even his familiar intercourse with the world. But he could not extemporize a speech. He could not on the spur of the moment string

together the more or less set phrases which an after-dinner oration demands. All his friends knew this, and spared him the necessity of refusing. He had once a headache all day, because at a dinner, the night before, a false report had reached him that he was going to be asked to speak. This alone would have sufficed to prevent him from accepting any public post. He confesses the disability in a pretty note to Professor Knight, written in reference to a recent meeting of the Wordsworth Society.

19 Warwick Crescent, W.,
May 9, 1884.

My dear Professor Knight, — I seem ungracious and ungrateful, but am neither; though, now that your festival is over, I wish I could have overcome my scruples and apprehensions. It is hard to say — when kind people press one to "just speak for a minute" — that the business, so easy to almost anybody, is too bewildering for one's self.

Ever truly yours,

Robert Browning.

A Rectorial Address need probably not have been extemporized, but it would also have been irksome to him to prepare. He was not accustomed to uttering himself in prose except within the limits, and under the incitements, of private correspondence. The ceremonial publicity attaching to all official proceedings would also have inevitably been a trial to him. He did at one of the Wordsworth Society meetings speak a sentence from the chair, in the absence of the appointed chairman, who had not yet arrived; and when he had received his degree from the University of Edinburgh he was persuaded to say a few words to the assembled students, in which I believe he thanked them for their warm welcome; but such exceptions only proved the rule.

We cannot doubt that the excited stream of talk which sometimes flowed from him was, in the given conditions of mind and imagination, due to a nervous impulse which he could not always restrain; and that the effusiveness of manner with which he greeted alike old

friends and new arose also from a momentary want of self-possession. We may admit this the more readily that in both cases it was allied to real kindness of intention, above all in the latter, where the fear of seeming cold towards even a friend's friend strove increasingly with the defective memory for names and faces which were not quite familiar to him. He was also profoundly averse to the idea of posing as a man of superior gifts; having, indeed, in regard to social intercourse, as little of the fastidiousness of genius as of its bohemianism. He therefore made it a rule, from the moment he took his place as a celebrity in the London world, to exert himself for the amusement of his fellow-guests at a dinner-table, whether their own mental resources were great or small; and this gave rise to a frequent effort at conversation, which converted itself into a habit, and ended by carrying him away. This at least was his own conviction in the matter. The loud voice, which so many persons must have learned to think habitual with him, bore also traces of this half-uncon-

scious nervous stimulation.[1] It was natural to him in anger or excitement, but did not express his gentler or more equable states of feeling; and when he read to others on a subject which moved him, his utterance often subsided into a tremulous softness which left it scarcely audible.

The mental conditions under which his powers of sympathy were exercised imposed no limits on his spontaneous human kindness. This characteristic benevolence, or power of love, is not fully represented in Mr. Browning's works; it is certainly not prominent in those of the later period, during which it found the widest scope in his life; but he has in some sense given its measure in what was intended as an illustration of the opposite quality. He tells us, in "Fifine at the

[1] Miss Browning reminds me that loud speaking had become natural to him through the deafness of several of his intimate friends: Landor, Kirkup, Barry Cornwall, and previously his uncle Reuben, whose hearing had been impaired in early life by a blow from a cricket ball. This fact necessarily modifies my impression of the case, but does not quite destroy it.

Fair," that while the best strength of women is to be found in their love, the best product of a man is only yielded to hate. It is the "indignant wine" which has been wrung from the grape plant by its external mutilation. He could depict it dramatically in more malignant forms of emotion; but he could only think of it personally as the reaction of a nobler feeling which has been gratuitously outraged or repressed.

He more directly, and still more truly, described himself when he said at about the same time, "I have never at any period of my life been deaf to an appeal made to me in the name of love." He was referring to an experience of many years before, in which he had even yielded his better judgment to such an appeal; and it was love in the larger sense for which the concession had been claimed.

It was impossible that so genuine a poet, and so real a man, should be otherwise than sensitive to the varied forms of feminine attraction. He avowedly preferred the society of women to that of men; they were, as I

have already said, his habitual confidants, and, evidently, his most frequent correspondents; and though he could have dispensed with woman friends as he dispensed with many other things — though he most often won them without knowing it — his frank interest in their sex, and the often caressing kindness of manner in which it was revealed, might justly be interpreted by individual women into a conscious appeal to their sympathy. It was therefore doubly remarkable that on the ground of benevolence, he scarcely discriminated between the claim on him of a woman, and that of a man; and his attitude towards women was in this respect so distinctive as to merit some words of notice. It was large, generous, and unconventional; but, for that very reason, it was not, in the received sense of the word, chivalrous. Chivalry proceeds on the assumption that women not only cannot, but should not, take care of themselves in any active struggle with life; Mr. Browning had no theoretical objection to a woman's taking care of herself. He

saw no reason why, if she was hit, she should not hit back again, or even why, if she hit, she should not receive an answering blow. He responded swiftly to every feminine appeal to his kindness or his protection, whether arising from physical weakness or any other obvious cause of helplessness or suffering; but the appeal in such cases lay first to his humanity, and only in second order to his consideration of sex. He would have had a man flogged who beat his wife; he would have had one flogged who ill-used a child — or an animal: he was notedly opposed to any sweeping principle or practice of vivisection. But he never quite understood that the strongest women are weak, or at all events vulnerable, in the very fact of their sex, through the minor traditions and conventions with which society justly, indeed necessarily, surrounds them. Still less did he understand those real, if impalpable, differences between men and women which correspond to the difference of position. He admitted the broad distinctions which have become

proverbial, and are therefore only a rough measure of the truth. He could say on occasion: "You ought to *be* better; you are a woman; I ought to *know* better; I am a man." But he had had too large an experience of human nature to attach permanent weight to such generalizations; and they found certainly no expression in his works. Scarcely an instance of a conventional, or so-called man's woman, occurs in their whole range. Excepting perhaps the speaker in "A Woman's Last Word," Pompilia and Mildred are the nearest approach to it; and in both of these we find qualities of imagination or thought which place them outside the conventional type. He instinctively judged women, both morally and intellectually, by the same standards as men; and when confronted by some divergence of thought or feeling, which meant, in the woman's case, neither quality nor defect in any strict sense of the word, but simply a nature trained to different points of view, an element of perplexity entered into his probable oppo-

sition. When the difference presented itself in a neutral aspect, it affected him like the casual peculiarities of a family or a group, or a casual disagreement between things of the same kind. He would say to a woman friend: "You women are so different from men!" in the tone in which he might have said, "You Irish, or you Scotch, are so different from Englishmen;" or again, "It is impossible for a man to judge how a woman would act in such or such a case; you are so different;" the case being sometimes one in which it would be inconceivable to a normal woman, and therefore to the generality of men, that she should act in any but one way.

The vague sense of mystery with which the poet's mind usually invests a being of the opposite sex had thus often in him its counterpart in a puzzled dramatic curiosity which constituted an equal ground of interest.

This virtual admission of equality between the sexes combined with his Liberal principles to dispose him favorably towards the movement for Female Emancipation. He

approved of everything that had been done for the higher instruction of women, and would, not very long ago, have supported their admission to the Franchise. But he was so much displeased by the more recent action of some of the lady advocates of Women's Rights that, during the last year of his life, after various modifications of opinion, he frankly pledged himself to the opposite view. He had even visions of writing a tragedy or drama in support of it. The plot was roughly sketched, and some dialogue composed, though I believe no trace of this remains.

It is almost implied by all I have said, that he possessed in every mood the charm of perfect simplicity of manner. On this point he resembled his father. His tastes lay also in the direction of great simplicity of life, though circumstances did not allow of his indulging them to the same extent. It may interest those who never saw him to know that he always dressed as well as the occasion required, and always with great indifference to the sub-

ject. In Florence he wore loose clothes which were adapted to the climate; in London his coats were cut by a good tailor in whatever was the prevailing fashion; the change was simply with him an incident of the situation. He had also a look of dainty cleanliness which was heightened by the smooth healthy texture of the skin, and in later life by the silvery whiteness of his hair.

His best photographic likenesses were those taken by Mr. Fradelle in 1881, Mr. Cameron and Mr. William Grove in 1888 and 1889.

CHAPTER XXI.

1887–1889.

Marriage of Mr. Barrett Browning. — Removal to De Vere Gardens. — Symptoms of failing Strength. — New Poems; New Edition of his Works. — Letters to Mr. George Bainton, Mr. Smith, and Lady Martin. — Primiero and Venice. — Letters to Miss Keep. — The last Year in London. — Asolo. — Letters to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, Mrs. Skirrow, and Mr. G. M. Smith.

THE last years of Mr. Browning's life were introduced by two auspicious events, in themselves of very unequal importance, but each in its own way significant for his happiness and his health. One was his son's marriage on October 4, 1887, to Miss Fannie Coddington, of New York, a lady towards whom Mr. Barrett Browning had been strongly attracted when he was a very young man and she little more than a child; the other, his own removal from Warwick Crescent to De Vere Gardens,

which took place in the previous June. The change of residence had long been with him only a question of opportunity. He was once even in treaty for a piece of ground at Kensington, and intended building a house. That in which he had lived for so many years had faults of construction and situation which the lapse of time rendered only more conspicuous; the Regent's Canal Bill had also doomed it to demolition; and when an opening presented itself for securing one in all essentials more suitable, he was glad to seize it, though at the eleventh hour. He had mentally fixed on the new locality in those earlier days in which he still thought his son might eventually settle in London; and it possessed at the same time many advantages for himself. It was warmer and more sheltered than any which he could have found on the north side of the Park; and, in that close vicinity to Kensington Gardens, walking might be contemplated as a pleasure, instead of mere compulsory motion from place to place. It was only too soon apparent that the time had

passed when he could reap much benefit from the event; but he became aware from the first moment of his installation in the new home that the conditions of physical life had become more favorable for him. He found an almost pathetic pleasure in completing the internal arrangements of the well-built, commodious house. It seems, on looking back, as if the veil had dropped before his eyes which sometimes shrouds the keenest vision in face of an impending change; and he had imagined, in spite of casual utterances which disclaimed the hope, that a new lease of life was being given to him. He had for several years been preparing for the more roomy dwelling which he would probably some day inhabit; and handsome pieces of old furniture had been stowed away in the house in Warwick Crescent, pending the occasion for their use. He loved antiquities of this kind, in a manner which sometimes recalled his father's affection for old books; and most of these had been bought in Venice, where frequent visits to the noted curiosity-shops had been his one bond of habit

with his tourist countrymen in that city. They matched the carved oak and massive gildings and valuable tapestries which had carried something of Casa Guidi into his first London home. Brass lamps that had once hung inside chapels in some Catholic church had long occupied the place of the habitual gasalier; and to these was added in the following year one of silver, also brought from Venice, — the Jewish "Sabbath lamp." Another acquisition, made only a few months, if indeed so long, before he left London for the last time, was that of a set of casts representing the Seasons, which were to stand at intervals on brackets in a certain unsightly space on his drawing-room wall; and he had said of these, which I think his son was procuring for him: "Only my four little heads, and then I shall not buy another thing for the house" — in a tone of childlike satisfaction at his completed work.

This summer he merely went to St. Moritz, where he and his sister were, for the greater part of their stay, again guests of Mrs. Bloom-

field Moore. He was determined to give the London winter a fuller trial in the more promising circumstances of his new life, and there was much to be done in De Vere Gardens after his return. His father's six thousand books, together with those he had himself accumulated, were for the first time to be spread out in their proper array, instead of crowding together in rows, behind and behind each other. The new bookcases, which could stand in the large new study, were waiting to receive them. He did not know until he tried to fulfill it how greatly the task would tax his strength. The library was, I believe, never completely arranged.

During this winter of 1887–88 his friends first perceived that a change had come over him. They did not realize that his life was drawing to a close; it was difficult to do so when so much of the former elasticity remained; when he still proclaimed himself "quite well" so long as he was not definitely suffering. But he was often suffering; one terrible cold followed another. There was

general evidence that he had at last grown old. He, however, made no distinct change in his mode of life. Old habits, suspended by his longer imprisonments to the house, were resumed as soon as he was set free. He still dined out; still attended the private view of every, or almost every, art exhibition. He kept up his unceasing correspondence — in one or two cases voluntarily added to it; though he would complain day after day that his fingers ached from the number of hours through which he had held his pen. One of the interesting letters of this period was written to Mr. George Bainton, of Coventry, to be used, as that gentleman tells me, in the preparation of a lecture on the "Art of Effective Written Composition." It confirms the statement I have had occasion to make, that no extraneous influence ever permanently impressed itself on Mr. Browning's style.

29 De Vere Gardens, W., *October* 6, 1887.

Dear Sir, — I was absent from London when your kind letter reached this house, to

which I removed some time ago — hence the delay in acknowledging your kindness, and replying, in some degree, to your request. All I can say, however, is this much — and very little — that, by the indulgence of my father and mother, I was allowed to live my own life and choose my own course in it; which, having been the same from the beginning to the end, necessitated a permission to read nearly all sorts of books, in a well-stocked and very miscellaneous library. I had no other direction than my parents' taste for whatever was highest and best in literature; but I found out for myself many forgotten fields which proved the richest of pastures: and, so far as a preference of a particular "style" is concerned, I believe mine was just the same at first as at last. I cannot name any one author who exclusively influenced me in that respect — as to the fittest expression of thought — but thought itself had many impulsions from very various sources, a matter not to your present purpose. I repeat, this is very little to say, but all in my power —

and it is heartily at your service — if not as of any value, at least as a proof that I gratefully feel your kindness, and am, dear sir,

Yours very truly,

ROBERT BROWNING.

In December, 1887, he wrote "Rosny," the first poem in "Asolando," and that which perhaps most displays his old subtle dramatic power; it was followed by "Beatrice Signorini" and "Flute-Music." Of the "Bad Dreams," two or three were also written in London, I think, during that winter. The "Ponte dell' Angelo" was imagined during the next autumn in Venice. "White Witchcraft" had been suggested in the same summer by a letter from a friend in the Channel Islands, which spoke of the number of toads to be seen there. In the spring of 1888 he began revising his works for the last, and now entirely uniform edition, which was issued in monthly volumes, and completed by the July of 1889. Important verbal corrections were made in "The Inn Album," though not, I

think, in many of the later poems; but that in which he found most room for improvement was, very naturally, "Pauline;" and he wrote concerning it to Mr. Smith the following interesting letter: —

29 De Vere Gardens, W., *February* 27, 1888.

My dear Smith, — When I received the proofs of the first volume on Friday evening, I made sure of returning them next day, so accurately are they printed. But on looking at that unlucky "Pauline," which I have not touched for half a century, a sudden impulse came over me to take the opportunity of just correcting the most obvious faults of expression, versification, and construction; letting the *thoughts*, such as they are, remain exactly as at first: I have only treated the imperfect expression of these just as I have now and then done for an amateur friend, if he asked me and I liked him enough to do so. Not a line is displaced, none added, none taken away. I have just sent it to the printer's, with an explanatory word; and told him that he

will have less trouble with all the rest of the volumes put together than with this little portion. I expect to return all the rest to-morrow or next day.

As for the sketch — the portrait — it admits of no very superior treatment: but, as it is the only one which makes me out youngish — I should like to know if an artist could not strengthen the thing by a pencil touch or two in a few minutes — improve the eyes, eyebrows, and mouth somewhat. The head, too, wants improvement: were Pen here he could manage it all in a moment.

Ever truly yours,

ROBERT BROWNING.

Any attempt at modifying the expressed thoughts of his twenty-first year would have been, as he probably felt, a futile tampering with the work of another man; his literary conscience would have forbidden this, if it had been otherwise possible. But he here proves by his own words what I have already asserted, that the power of detail correction

either was, or had become by experience, very strong in him.

The history of this summer of 1888 is partly given in a letter to Lady Martin.

29 De Vere Gardens, W.,
August 12, 1888.

Dear Lady Martin, — The date of your kind letter — June 18 — would affect me indeed, but for the good conscience I retain despite of appearances. So uncertain have I been as to the course we should take — my sister and myself — when the time came for leaving town, that it seemed as if "next week" might be the eventful week when all doubts would disappear — perhaps the strange cold weather and interminable rain made it hard to venture from under one's roof even in fancy of being better lodged elsewhere. This very day week it was the old story — cold — then followed the suffocating eight or nine tropical days which forbade any more delay, and we leave to-morrow for a place called Primiero, near Feltre — where my son and his wife

assure us we may be comfortably — and coolly — housed, until we can accompany them to Venice, which we may stay at for a short time. You remember our troubles at Llangollen about the purchase of a Venetian house . . .? My son, however, nothing daunted, and acting under abler counsels than I was fortunate enough to obtain,[1] has obtained a still more desirable acquisition, in the shape of the well-known Rezzonico Palace (that of Pope Clement 13th) — and, I believe, is to be congratulated on his bargain. I cannot profess the same interest in this as in the earlier object of his ambition, but am quite satisfied by the evident satisfaction of the "young people." So — by the old law of compensation — while we may expect pleasant days abroad — our chance is gone of once again enjoying your company in your own lovely Vale of Llangollen ; had we not been pulled otherwise by the inducements we could not resist — another term of delightful weeks — each tipped with a sweet starry Sunday at the little

[1] Those of Mr. Alexander Malcolm.

church leading to the House Beautiful where we took our rest of an evening spent always memorably — this might have been our fortunate lot once again! As it is, perhaps we need more energetic treatment than we should get with you — for both of us are more oppressed than ever by the exigencies of the lengthy season, and require still more bracing air than the gently lulling temperature of Wales. May it be doing you, and dear Sir Theodore, all the good you deserve — throwing in the share due to us, who must forego it! With all love from us both, ever affectionately yours,

ROBERT BROWNING.

He did start for Italy on the following day, but had become so ill that he was on the point of postponing his departure. He suffered throughout the journey as he had never suffered on any journey before; and during his first few days at Primiero, could only lead the life of an invalid. He rallied, however, as usual, under the potent effects of quiet,

fresh air, and sunshine; and fully recovered his normal state before proceeding to Venice, where the continued sense of physical health combined with many extraneous circumstances to convert his proposed short stay into a long one. A letter from the mountains, addressed to a lady who had never been abroad, and to whom he sometimes wrote with more descriptive detail than to other friends, gives a touching glimpse of his fresh delight in the beauties of nature, and his tender constant sympathy with the animal creation.

PRIMIERO, *September* 7, 1888.

. . . . . .

The weather continues exquisitely temperate, yet sunny, ever since the clearing thunderstorm of which I must have told you in my last. It is, I am more and more confirmed in believing, the most beautiful place I was ever resident in: far more so than Gressoney, or even St.-Pierre de Chartreuse. You would indeed delight in seeing the magnificence of the mountains — the range on either side,

which morning and evening, in turn, transmute literally to gold — I mean what I say. Their utterly bare ridges of peaks and crags of all shape, quite naked of verdure, glow like yellow ore; and, at times, there is a silver change, as the sun prevails or not.

The valley is one green luxuriance on all sides; Indian corn, with beans, gourds, and even cabbages, filling up the interstices; and the flowers, though not presenting any novelty to my uninstructed eyes, yet surely more large and purely developed than I remember to have seen elsewhere. For instance, the tiger-lilies in the garden here must be above ten feet high, every bloom faultless, and, what strikes me as peculiar, every leaf on the stalk from bottom to top as perfect as if no insect existed to spoil them by a notch or speck. . . .

. . . Did I tell you we had a little captive fox — the most engaging of little vixens? To my great joy she has broken her chain and escaped, never to be recaptured, I trust. The original wild and untamable nature was to be plainly discerned even in this early stage of

the whelp's life: she dug herself, with such baby feet, a huge hole, the use of which was evident, when, one day, she pounced thence on a stray turkey — allured within reach by the fragments of fox's breakfast — the intruder escaping with the loss of his tail. The creature came back one night to explore the old place of captivity — ate some food and retired. For myself — I continue absolutely well: I do not walk much, but for more than amends, am in the open air all day long.

No less striking is a short extract from a letter written in Venice to the same friend, Miss Keep.

Ca' Alvise, *October* 16, 1888.

Every morning at six, I see the sun rise; far more wonderfully, to my mind, than his famous setting, which everybody glorifies. My bedroom window commands a perfect view: the still, gray lagune, the few seagulls flying, the islet of S. Giorgio in deep shadow, and the clouds in a long purple rack, behind which a sort of spirit of rose burns up till

presently all the rims are on fire with gold, and last of all the orb sends before it a long column of its own essence apparently: so my day begins.

We feel, as we read these late, and even later words, that the lyric imagination was renewing itself in the incipient dissolution of other powers. It is the Browning of "Pippa Passes" who speaks in them.

He suffered less on the whole during the winter of 1888–89. It was already advanced when he returned to England; and the attacks of cold and asthma were either shorter or less frequent. He still maintained throughout the season his old social routine, not omitting his yearly visit, on the anniversary of Waterloo, to Lord Albemarle, its last surviving veteran. He went for some days to Oxford during the commemoration week, and had for the first, as also last time, the pleasure of Dr. Jowett's almost exclusive society at his beloved Balliol College. He proceeded with his new volume of poems. A short let-

ter written to Professor Knight, June 16, and of which the occasion speaks for itself, fitly closes the labors of his life; for it states his view of the position and function of poetry, in one brief phrase, which might form the text to an exhaustive treatise upon them.

29 De Vere Gardens, W., *June* 16, 1889.

My dear Professor Knight, — I am delighted to hear that there is a likelihood of your establishing yourself in Glasgow, and illustrating Literature as happily as you have expounded Philosophy at St. Andrews. It is certainly the right order of things: Philosophy first, and Poetry, which is its highest outcome, afterward — and much harm has been done by reversing the natural process. How capable you are of doing justice to the highest philosophy embodied in poetry, your various studies on Wordsworth prove abundantly; and for the sake of both Literature and Philosophy I wish you success with all my heart.

Believe me, dear Professor Knight, yours very truly, Robert Browning.

But he experienced, when the time came, more than his habitual disinclination for leaving home. A distinct shrinking from the fatigue of going to Italy now added itself to it; for he had suffered when traveling back in the previous winter almost as much as on the outward journey, though he attributed the distress to a different cause: his nerves were, he thought, shaken by the wearing discomforts incidental on a broken tooth. He was for the first time painfully sensitive to the vibration of the train. He had told his friends, both in Venice and London, that so far as he was able to determine, he would never return to Italy. But it was necessary he should go somewhere, and he had no alternative plan. For a short time in this last summer he entertained the idea of a visit to Scotland; it had indeed definitely shaped itself in his mind; but an incident, trivial in itself, though he did not think it so, destroyed the first scheme, and it was then practically too late to form another. During the second week in August the weather broke. There could no longer be any

question of the northward journey without even a fixed end in view. His son and daughter had taken possession of their new home, the Palazzo Rezzonico, and were anxious to see him and Miss Browning there; their wishes naturally had weight. The casting vote in favor of Venice was given by a letter from Mrs. Bronson, proposing Asolo as the intermediate stage. She had fitted up for herself a little summer retreat there, and promised that her friends should, if they joined her, be also comfortably installed. The journey was this time propitious. It was performed without imprudent haste, and Mr. Browning reached Asolo unfatigued and to all appearance well.

He saw this, his first love among Italian cities, at a season of the year more favorable to its beauty than even that of his first visit; yet he must himself have been surprised by the new rapture of admiration which it created in him, and which seemed to grow with his lengthened stay. This state of mind was the more striking, that new symptoms of his phys-

ical decline were now becoming apparent, and were in themselves of a depressing kind. He wrote to a friend in England that the atmosphere of Asolo, far from being oppressive, produced in him all the effects of mountain air, and he was conscious of difficulty of breathing whenever he walked up hill. He also suffered, as the season advanced, great inconvenience from cold. The rooms occupied by himself and his sister were both unprovided with fireplaces; and though the daily dinner with Mrs. Bronson obviated the discomfort of the evenings, there remained still too many hours of the autumnal day in which the impossibility of heating their own little apartment must have made itself unpleasantly felt. The latter drawback would have been averted by the fulfillment of Mr. Browning's first plan, to be in Venice by the beginning of October, and return to the comforts of his own home before the winter had quite set in; but one slight motive for delay succeeded another, till at last a more serious project introduced sufficient ground of detention. He

seemed possessed by a strange buoyancy — an almost feverish joy in life, which blunted all sensations of physical distress, or helped him to misinterpret them. When warned against the imprudence of remaining where he knew he suffered from cold, and believed, rightly or wrongly, that his asthmatic tendencies were increased, he would reply that he was growing acclimatized — that he was quite well. And, in a fitful or superficial sense, he must have been so.

His letters of that period are one continuous picture, glowing with his impressions of the things which they describe. The same words will repeat themselves as the same subject presents itself to his pen; but the impulse to iteration scarcely ever affects us as mechanical. It seems always a fresh response to some new stimulus to thought or feeling which he has received. These reach him from every side. It is not only the Asolo of this peaceful later time which has opened before him, but the Asolo of "Pippa Passes" and "Sordello;" that which first stamped itself

on his imagination in the echoes of the court life of Queen Catharine,[1] and of the barbaric wars of the Eccelini. Some of his letters dwell especially on these early historical associations: on the strange sense of reopening the ancient chronicle which he had so deeply studied fifty years before. The very phraseology of the old Italian text, which I am certain he had never glanced at from that distant time, is audible in an account of the massacre of San Zenone, the scene of which he has been visiting. To the same correspondent he says that his two hours' drive to Asolo "seemed to be a dream;" and again, after describing, or, as he thinks, only trying to describe, some beautiful feature of the place, "but it is indescribable!"

A letter addressed to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, October 8, 1889, is in part a fitting sequel to that which he had written to her from the same spot, eleven years before.

. . . "Fortunately there is little changed here: my old Albergo — ruinous with earth-

[1] Catharine Cornaro, the dethroned queen of Cyprus.

quake — is down and done with — but few novelties are observable — except the regrettable one that the silk industry has been transported elsewhere — to Cornuda and other places nearer the main railway. No more Pippas — at least of the silk-winding sort!

"But the pretty type is far from extinct.

"Autumn is beginning to paint the foliage, but thin it as well; and the sea of fertility all round our height, which a month ago showed pomegranates and figs and chestnuts — walnuts and apples all rioting together in full glory — all this is daily disappearing. I say nothing of the olive and the vine. I find the Turret rather the worse for careful weeding — the hawks which used to build there have been 'shot for food' — and the echo is sadly curtailed of its replies; still, things are the same in the main. Shall I ever see them again, when — as I suppose — we leave for Venice in a fortnight?" . . .

In the midst of this imaginative delight he carried into his walks the old keen habits of observation. He would peer into the hedges

for what living things were to be found there. He would whistle softly to the lizards basking on the low walls which border the roads, to try his old power of attracting them.

On the 15th of October he wrote to Mrs. Skirrow, after some preliminary description:

Then — such a view over the whole Lombard plain; not a site in view, or *approximate* view at least, without its story. Autumn is now painting all the abundance of verdure — figs, pomegranates, chestnuts, and vines, and I don't know what else — all in a wonderful confusion — and now glowing with all the colors of the rainbow. Some weeks back, the little town was glorified by the visit of a decent theatrical troop, who played in a theatre *in*side the old palace of Queen Catharine Cornaro — utilized also as a prison in which I am informed are at present full five if not six malefactors guilty of stealing grapes, and the like enormities. Well, the troop played for a fortnight together exceedingly well — high tragedy and low comedy — and the stage-box

which I occupied cost 16 francs. The theatre had been out of use for six years, for we are out of the way and only a baiting-place for a company pushing on to Venice. In fine, we shall stay here probably for a week or more, and then proceed to Pen, at the Rezzonico; a month there, and then homewards! . . .

I delight in finding that the beloved Husband and precious friend manages to do without the old yoke about his neck, and enjoys himself as never anybody had a better right to do. I continue to congratulate him on his emancipation and ourselves on a more frequent enjoyment of his company in consequence.[1] Give him my true love; take mine, dearest friend — and my sister's love to you both goes with it.

Ever affectionately yours,

ROBERT BROWNING.

The cry of "homewards!" now frequently recurs in his letters. We find it in one writ-

[1] Mr. Skirrow had just resigned his post of Master in Chancery.

ten a week later to Mr. G. M. Smith, otherwise very expressive of his latest condition of mind and feeling.

ASOLO, VENETO, ITALIA, *October* 22, 1889.

MY DEAR SMITH, — I was indeed delighted to get your letter two days ago — for there *are* such accidents as the loss of a parcel, even when it has been dispatched from so important a place as this city — for a regular city it is, you must know, with all the rights of one — older far than Rome, being founded by the Euganeans who gave their name to the adjoining hills. "Fortified" it was once, assuredly, and the walls still surround it most picturesquely though mainly in utter ruin, and you even overrate the population, which does not now much exceed 900 souls — in the city proper, that is — for the territory below and around contains some 10,000. But we are at the very top of things, garlanded about, as it were, with a narrow line of houses — some palatial, such as you would be glad to see in London — and above all towers the old dwell-

ing of Queen Cornaro, who was forced to exchange her Kingdom of Cyprus for this pretty but petty dominion where she kept state in a mimic court, with Bembo, afterwards Cardinal, for her secretary — who has commemorated the fact in his "Asolani" or dialogues inspired by the place: and I do assure you that, after some experience of beautiful sights in Italy and elsewhere, I know nothing comparable to the view from the Queen's tower and palace, still perfect in every respect. Whenever you pay Pen and his wife the visit you are pledged to, * it will go hard but you spend five hours in a journey to Asolo. The one thing I am disappointed in is to find that the silk-cultivation, with all the pretty girls who were engaged in it, is transported to Cornuda and other places — nearer the railway, I suppose: and to this may be attributed the decrease in the number of inhabitants. The weather when I wrote last *was* "blue and blazing — (at noon-day)" — but we share in the general plague of rain — had a famous storm yesterday: while to-day is blue and

sunny as ever. Lastly, for your admonition: we *have* a perfect telegraphic communication; and at the passage above, where I put a * I was interrupted by the arrival of a telegram: thank you all the same for your desire to relieve my anxiety. And now, to our immediate business — which is only to keep thanking you for your constant goodness, present and future: do with the book just as you will. I fancy it is bigger in bulk than usual. As for the "proofs" — I go at the end of the month to Venice, whither you will please to send whatever is necessary. . . . I shall do well to say as little as possible of my good wishes for you and your family, for it comes to much the same thing as wishing myself prosperity: no matter, my sister's kindest regards shall excuse mine, and I will only add that I am, as ever,

Affectionately yours,
ROBERT BROWNING.

A general quickening of affectionate impulse seemed part of this last leap in the socket of the dying flame.

CHAPTER XXII.

1889.

Proposed Purchase of Land at Asolo. — Venice. — Letter to Mr. G. Moulton-Barrett. — Lines in the "Athenæum." — Letter to Miss Keep. — Illness. — Death. — Funeral Ceremonial at Venice. — Publication of "Asolando." — Interment in Poets' Corner.

He had said in writing to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, "Shall I ever see them" (the things he is describing) "again?" If not then, soon afterwards, he conceived a plan which was to insure his doing so. On a piece of ground belonging to the old castle stood the shell of a house. The two constituted one property, which the Municipality of Asolo had hitherto refused to sell. It had been a dream of Mr. Browning's life to possess a dwelling, however small, in some beautiful spot, which should place him beyond the necessity of constantly seeking a new summer resort, and above the

alternative of living at an inn, or accepting — as he sometimes feared, abusing — the hospitality of his friends. He was suddenly fascinated by the idea of buying this piece of ground; and, with the efficient help which his son could render during his absence, completing the house, which should be christened "Pippa's Tower." It was evident, he said in one of his letters, that for his few remaining years his summer wanderings must always end in Venice. What could he do better than secure for himself this resting-place by the way?

His offer of purchase was made through Mrs. Bronson to Count Loredano and other important members of the municipality, and their personal assent to it secured. But the town council was on the eve of reëlection; no important business could be transacted by it till after this event; and Mr. Browning awaited its decision till the end of October at Asolo, and again throughout November in Venice, without fully understanding the delay. The vote proved favorable; but the

night on which it was taken was that of his death.

The consent thus given would have been only a first step towards the accomplishment of his wish. It was necessary that it should be ratified by the Prefecture of Treviso, in the district of which Asolo lies; and Mr. Barrett Browning, who had determined to carry on the negotiations, met with subsequent opposition in the higher council. This has now, however, been happily overcome.

A comprehensive interest attaches to one more letter of the Asolo time. It was addressed to Mr. Browning's brother-in-law, Mr. George Moulton-Barrett.

Asolo, Veneto, *October* 22, 1889.

My dear George, — It was a great pleasure to get your kind letter; though after some delay. We were not in the Tyrol this year, but have been for six weeks or more in this little place, which strikes me — as it did fifty years ago, which is something to say, considering that, properly speaking, it was the first

spot of Italian soil I ever set foot upon — having proceeded to Venice by sea — and thence here. It is an ancient city, older than Rome, and the scene of Queen Catharine Cornaro's exile, where she held a mock court, with all its attendants, on a miniature scale; Bembo, afterwards Cardinal, being her secretary. Her palace is still above us all, the old fortifications surround the hilltop, and certain of the houses are stately — though the population is not above 1,000 souls: the province contains many more, of course. But the immense charm of the surrounding country is indescribable — I have never seen its like — the Alps on one side, the Asolan mountains all round — and opposite, the vast Lombard plain — with indications of Venice, Padua, and the other cities, visible to a good eye on a clear day; while everywhere are sites of battles and sieges of bygone days, described in full by the historians of the Middle Ages.

We have a valued friend here, Mrs. Bronson, who for years has been our hostess at Venice, and now is in possession of a house

here (built into the old city wall) — she was induced to choose it through what I have said about the beauties of the place: and through her care and kindness we are comfortably lodged close by. We think of leaving in a week or so for Venice — guests of Pen and his wife; and after a short stay with them we shall return to London. Pen came to see us for a couple of days: I was hardly prepared for his surprise and admiration, which quite equaled my own and that of my sister. All is happily well with them — their palazzo excites the wonder of everybody, so great is Pen's cleverness, and extemporized architectural knowledge, as apparent in all he has done there; why, *why* will you not go and see him there? He and his wife are very hospitable and receive many visitors. Have I told you that there was a desecrated chapel which he has restored in honor of his mother — putting up there the inscription by Tommaseo now above Casa Guidi?

Fannie is all you say — and most dear and precious to us all. . . . Pen's medal, to which

you refer, is awarded to him in spite of his written renunciation of any sort of wish to contend for a prize. He will now resume painting and sculpture — having been necessarily occupied with the superintendence of his workmen — a matter capitally managed, I am told. For the rest, both Sarianna and myself are very well; I have just sent off my new volume of verses for publication. The complete edition of the works of E. B. B. begins in a few days.

The second part of this letter is very forcibly written, and, in a certain sense, more important than the first; but I suppress it by the desire of Mr. Browning's sister and son, and in complete concurrence with their judgment in the matter. It was a systematic defense of the anger aroused in him by a lately published reference to his wife's death; and though its reasonings were unanswerable as applied to the causes of his emotion, they did not touch the manner in which it had been displayed. The incident was one which de-

served only to be forgotten; and if an injudicious act had not preserved its memory, no word of mine should recall it. Since, however, it has been thought fit to include the "Lines to Edward Fitzgerald" in a widely circulated Bibliography of Mr. Browning's Works,[1] I owe it to him to say — what I believe is only known to his sister and myself — that there was a moment in which he regretted those lines, and would willingly have withdrawn them. This was the period, unfortunately short, which intervened between his sending them to the "Athenæum," and their appearance there. When once public opinion had expressed itself upon them in its too extreme forms of sympathy and condemnation, the pugnacity of his mind found support in both, and regret was silenced if not destroyed. In so far as his published words remained open to censure, I may also, without indelicacy, urge one more plea in his behalf. That which to the merely sympathetic observer ap-

[1] That contained in Mr. Sharpe's *Life*. A still more recent publication gives the lines in full.

peared a subject for disapprobation, perhaps disgust, had affected him with the directness of a sharp physical blow. He spoke of it, and for hours, even days, was known to feel it, as such. The events of that distant past, which he had lived down, though never forgotten, had flashed upon him from the words which so unexpectedly met his eye, in a vividness of remembrance which was reality. "I felt as if she had died yesterday," he said some days later to a friend, in half deprecation, half denial, of the too great fierceness of his reaction. He only recovered his balance in striking the counter-blow. That he could be thus affected at an age usually destructive of the more violent emotions is part of the mystery of those closing days which had already overtaken him.

By the first of November he was in Venice with his son and daughter; and during the three following weeks was apparently well, though a physician whom he met at a dinner party, and to whom he had half jokingly given his pulse to feel, had learned from it

that his days were numbered. He wrote to Miss Keep on the 9th of the month: —

. . . "Mrs. Bronson has bought a house at Asolo, and beautified it indeed — niched as it is in an old tower of the fortifications still partly surrounding the city (for a city it is), and eighteen towers, more or less ruinous, are still discoverable there: it is indeed a delightful place. Meantime, to go on — we came here, and had a pleasant welcome from our hosts — who are truly magnificently lodged in this vast palazzo which my son has really shown himself fit to possess, so surprising are his restorations and improvements: the whole is all but complete, decorated — that is, renewed admirably in all respects.

"What strikes me as most noteworthy is the cheerfulness and comfort of the huge rooms.

"The building is warmed throughout by a furnace and pipes.

"Yesterday, on the Lido, the heat was hardly endurable: bright sunshine, blue sky — snow-tipped Alps in the distance. No

place, I think, ever suited my needs, bodily and intellectual, so well.

"The first are satisfied — I am *quite* well, every breathing inconvenience gone: and as for the latter, I got through whatever had given me trouble in London." . . .

But it was winter, even in Venice, and one day began with an actual fog. He insisted, notwithstanding, on taking his usual walk on the Lido. He caught a bronchial cold, of which the symptoms were aggravated not only by the asthmatic tendency, but by what proved to be exhaustion of the heart; and believing as usual that his liver alone was at fault, he took little food, and refused wine altogether.[1]

He did not yield to the sense of illness; he did not keep his bed. Some feverish energy must have supported him through this avoidance of every measure which might have

[1] He always declined food when he was unwell; and maintained that in this respect the instinct of animals was far more just than the idea often prevailing among human beings that a failing appetite should be assisted or coerced.

afforded even temporary strength or relief. On Friday, the 29th, he wrote to a friend in London that he had waited thus long for the final answer from Asolo, but would wait no longer. He would start for England, if possible, on the Wednesday or Thursday of the following week. It was true "he had caught a cold; he felt sadly asthmatic, scarcely fit to travel; but he hoped for the best, and would write again soon." He wrote again the following day, declaring himself better. He had been punished, he said, for long-standing neglect of his "provoking liver;" but a simple medicine, which he had often taken before, had this time also relieved the oppression of his chest; his friend was not to be uneasy about him; "it was in his nature to get into scrapes of this kind, but he always managed, somehow or other, to extricate himself from them." He concluded with fresh details of his hopes and plans.

In the ensuing night the bronchial distress increased; and in the morning he consented to see his son's physician, Dr. Cini, whose in-

vestigation of the case at once revealed to him its seriousness. The patient had been removed two days before, from the second story of the house, which the family then inhabited, to an entresol apartment just above the ground-floor, from which he could pass into the dining-room without fatigue. Its lower ceilings gave him (erroneously) an impression of greater warmth, and he had imagined himself benefited by the change. A freer circulation of air was now considered imperative, and he was carried to Mrs. Browning's spacious bedroom, where an open fireplace supplied both warmth and ventilation, and large windows admitted all the sunshine of the Grand Canal. Everything was done for him which professional skill and loving care could do. Mrs. Browning, assisted by her husband, and by a young lady who was then her guest,[1] filled the place of the trained nurses until these could arrive; for a few days the impending calamity seemed even to have been averted. The bronchial attack was overcome.

[1] Miss Evelyn Barclay, now Mrs. Douglas Giles.

Mr. Browning had once walked from the bed to the sofa; his sister, whose anxiety had perhaps been spared the full knowledge of his state, could send comforting reports to his friends at home. But the enfeebled heart had made its last effort. Attacks of faintness set in. Special signs of physical strength maintained themselves until within a few hours of the end. On Wednesday, December 11, a consultation took place between Dr. Cini, Dr. da Vigna, and Dr. Minich; and the opinion was then expressed for the first time that recovery, though still possible, was not within the bounds of probability. Weakness, however, rapidly gained upon him towards the close of the following day. Two hours before midnight of this Thursday, December 12, he breathed his last.

He had been a good patient. He took food and medicine whenever they were offered to him. Doctors and nurses became alike warmly interested in him. His favorite among the latter was, I think, the Venetian, a widow, Margherita Fiori, a simple, kindly creature

who had known much sorrow. To her he said, about five hours before the end, "I feel much worse. I know now that I must die." He had shown at intervals a perception, even conviction, of his danger; but the excitement of the brain, caused by exhaustion on the one hand and the necessary stimulants on the other, must have precluded all systematic consciousness of approaching death. He repeatedly assured his family that he was not suffering.

A painful and urgent question now presented itself for solution: Where should his body find its last rest? He had said to his sister in the foregoing summer, that he wished to be buried wherever he might die: if in England, with his mother; if in France, with his father; if in Italy, with his wife. Circumstances all pointed to his removal to Florence; but a recent decree had prohibited further interment in the English Cemetery there, and the town had no power to rescind it. When this was known in Venice, that city begged for itself the privilege of retaining the illus-

trious guest, and rendering him the last honors. For the moment, the idea even recommended itself to Mr. Browning's son. But he felt bound to make a last effort in the direction of the burial at Florence; and was about to dispatch a telegram, in which he invoked the mediation of Lord Dufferin, when all difficulties were laid at rest by a message from the Dean of Westminster, conveying his assent to an interment in the Abbey.[1] He had already telegraphed for information concerning the date of the funeral, with a view to the memorial service, which he intended to hold on the same day. Nor would the further honor have remained for even twenty-four hours ungranted, because unasked, but for the belief prevailing among Mr. Browning's friends that there was no room for its acceptance.

It was still necessary to provide for the more immediate removal of the body. Local custom forbade its retention after the lapse of two days and nights; and only in view of the

[1] The assent thus conveyed had assumed the form of an offer, and was characterized as such by the Dean himself.

special circumstances of the case could a short respite be granted to the family. Arrangements were therefore at once made for a private service, to be conducted by the British Chaplain in one of the great halls of the Rezzonico Palace; and by two o'clock of the following day, Sunday, a large number of visitors and residents had assembled there. The subsequent passage to the mortuary island of San Michele had been organized by the city, and was to display so much of the character of a public pageant as the hurried preparation allowed. The chief municipal officers attended the service. When this had been performed, the coffin was carried by eight firemen (*pompieri*), arrayed in their distinctive uniform, to the massive, highly decorated municipal barge (*Barca delle Pompe funebri*), which waited to receive it. It was guarded during the transit by four *uscieri* in "gala" dress, two sergeants of the Municipal Guard, and two of the firemen bearing torches: the remainder of these following in a smaller boat. The barge was towed by a steam launch

of the Royal Italian Marine. The chief officers of the city, the family and friends in their separate gondolas, completed the procession. On arriving at San Michele, the firemen again received their burden, and bore it to the chapel in which its place had been reserved.

When "Pauline" first appeared, the author had received, he never learned from whom, a sprig of laurel inclosed with this quotation from the poem: —

Trust in signs and omens.

Very beautiful garlands were now piled about his bier, offerings of friendship and affection. Conspicuous among these was the ceremonial structure of metallic foliage and porcelain flowers, inscribed *Venezia a Roberto Browning*, which represented the Municipality of Venice. On the coffin lay one comprehensive symbol of the fulfilled prophecy: a wreath of laurel leaves which his son had placed there.

A final honor was decreed to the great English poet by the city in which he had died: the affixing of a memorial tablet to the outer wall of the Rezzonico Palace. Since these pages were first written, the tablet has been placed. It bears the following inscription: —

A
ROBERTO BROWNING
MORTO IN QUESTO PALAZZO
IL 12 DICEMBRE 1889
VENEZIA
POSE

Below this, in the right-hand corner, appear two lines selected from his works: —

> Open my heart and you will see
> Graved inside of it, "Italy."

Nor were these the only expressions of Italian respect and sympathy. The Municipality of Florence sent its message of condolence. Asolo, poor in all but memories, itself bore the expenses of a mural tablet for the house which Mr. Browning had occupied. It is now

known that Signor Crispi would have appealed to Parliament to rescind the exclusion from the Florentine cemetery, if the motive for doing so had been less promptly removed.

Mr. Browning's own country had indeed opened a way for the reunion of the husband and wife. The idea had rapidly shaped itself in the public mind that, since they might not rest side by side in Italy, they should be placed together among the great of their own land; and it was understood that the Dean would sanction Mrs. Browning's interment in the Abbey, if a formal application to this end were made to him. But Mr. Barrett Browning could not reconcile himself to the thought of disturbing his mother's grave, so long consecrated to Florence by her warm love and by its grateful remembrance; and at the desire of both surviving members of the family the suggestion was set aside.

Two days after his temporary funeral, privately and at night, all that remained of Robert Browning was conveyed to the railway station; and thence, by a trusted servant, to

England. The family followed within twenty-four hours, having made the necessary preparations for a long absence from Venice; and, traveling with the utmost speed, arrived in London on the same day. The house in De Vere Gardens received its master once more.

"Asolando" was published on the day of Mr. Browning's death. The report of his illness had quickened public interest in the forthcoming work, and his son had the satisfaction of telling him of its already realized success, while he could still receive a warm, if momentary pleasure from the intelligence. The circumstances of its appearance place it beyond ordinary criticism; they place it beyond even an impartial analysis of its contents. It includes one or two poems to which we would gladly assign a much earlier date; I have been told on good authority that we may do this in regard to one of them. It is difficult to refer the "Epilogue" to a coherent mood of any period of its author's life. It is certain, however, that by far the greater part

of the little volume was written in 1888–89, and I believe all that is most serious in it was the product of the later year. It possesses for many readers the inspiration of farewell words; for all of us it has their pathos.

He was buried in Westminster Abbey, in Poets' Corner, on the 31st of December, 1889. In this tardy act of national recognition England claimed her own. A densely packed, reverent, and sympathetic crowd of his countrymen and countrywomen assisted at the consignment of the dead poet to his historic resting place. Three verses of Mrs. Browning's poem, "The Sleep," set to music by Dr. Bridge, were sung for the first time on this occasion.

CONCLUSION.

A FEW words must still be said upon that purport and tendency of Robert Browning's work which has been defined by a few persons, and felt by very many, as his "message."

The definition has been disputed on the ground of Art. We are told by Mr. Sharp, though in somewhat different words, that the poet, *quâ* poet, cannot deliver a "message" such as directly addresses itself to the intellectual or moral sense; since his special appeal to us lies not through the substance, but through the form, or presentment, of what he has had to say; since, therefore (by implication), in claiming for it an intellectual — as distinct from an æsthetic — character, we ignore its function as poetry.

It is difficult to argue justly where the question at issue turns practically on the mean-

ing of a word. Mr. Sharp would, I think, be the first to admit this; and it appears to me that, in the present case, he so formulates his theory as to satisfy his artistic conscience, and yet leave room for the recognition of that intellectual quality so peculiar to Mr. Browning's verse. But what one member of the æsthetic school may express with a certain reserve is proclaimed unreservedly by many more; and Mr. Sharp must forgive me if, for the moment, I regard him as one of these; and if I oppose his arguments in the words of another poet and critic of poetry, whose claim to the double title is, I believe, undisputed — Mr. Roden Noel. I quote from an unpublished fragment of a published article on Mr. Sharp's "Life of Browning."

"Browning's message is an integral part of himself as writer (whether as poet, since we agree that he is poet, were surely a too curious and vain discussion); but some of his finest things assuredly are the outcome of certain very definite personal convictions. '*The question*,' Mr. Sharp says, '*is not one of weighty*

message, but of artistic presentation.' There seems to be no true contrast here. '*The primary concern of the artist must be with his vehicle of expression*' — no, not the primary concern. Since the critic adds — (for a poet) '*this vehicle is language emotioned to the white heat of rhythmic music by impassioned thought or sensation.*' Exactly — 'thought' it may be. Now part of this same 'thought' in Browning is the message. And therefore it is part of his 'primary concern.' '*It is with presentment,*' says Mr. Sharp, '*that the artist has fundamentally to concern himself.*' Granted: but it must surely be presentment of *something*. . . . I do not understand how to separate the substance from the form in true poetry. . . . If the message be not well delivered, it does not constitute literature. But if it be well delivered, the primary concern of the poet lay with the message after all!"

More cogent objection has been taken to the character of the "message" as judged from a philosophic point of view. It is the

expression or exposition of a vivid *a priori* religious faith confirmed by positive experience; and it reflects as such a double order of thought, in which totally opposite mental activities are often forced into coöperation with each other. Mr. Sharp says, this time quoting from Mr. Mortimer[1] ("Scottish Art Review," December, 1889): —

"His position in regard to the thought of the age is paradoxical, if not inconsistent. He is in advance of it in every respect but one, the most important of all, the matter of fundamental principles; in these he is behind it. His processes of thought are often scientific in their precision of analysis; the sudden conclusion which he imposes upon them is transcendental and inept."

This statement is relatively true. Mr. Browning's positive reasonings often do end with transcendental conclusions. They also start from transcendental premises. However closely his mind might follow the visible order

[1] One of the last words of the transcribed passage has, I think, been softened; but I cannot now ascertain the fact.

of experience, he never lost what was for him the consciousness of a Supreme Eternal Will as having existed before it; he never lost the vision of an intelligent First Cause as underlying all minor systems of causation. But such weaknesses as were involved in his logical position are inherent to all the higher forms of natural theology when once it has been erected into a dogma. As maintained by Mr. Browning, this belief held a saving clause, which removed it from all dogmatic, hence all admissible grounds of controversy; the more definite or concrete conceptions of which it consists possessed no finality for even his own mind; they represented for him an absolute truth in contingent relations to it. No one felt more strongly than he the contradictions involved in any conceivable system of Divine creation and government. No one knew better that every act and motive which we attribute to a Supreme Being is a virtual negation of his existence. He believed, nevertheless, that such a Being exists; and he accepted his reflection in the mirror of the hu-

man consciousness as a necessarily false image, but one which bears witness to the truth.

His works rarely indicate this condition of feeling; it was not often apparent in his conversation. The faith which he had contingently accepted became absolute for him from all practical points of view; it became subject to all the conditions of his humanity. On the ground of abstract logic he was always ready to disavow it; the transcendental imagination and the acknowledged limits of human reason claimed the last word in its behalf. This philosophy of religion is distinctly suggested in the fifth parable of "Ferishtah's Fancies."

But even in defending what remains, from the most widely accepted point of view, the validity of Mr. Browning's "message," we concede the fact that it is most powerful when conveyed in its least explicit form; for then alone does it bear, with the full weight of his poetic utterance, on the minds to which it is addressed. His challenge to Faith and Hope imposes itself far less

through any intellectual plea which he can advance in its support, than through the unconscious testimony of all creative genius to the marvel of conscious life; through the passionate affirmation of his poetic and human nature, not only of the goodness and the beauty of that life, but of its reality and its persistence.

We are told by Mr. Sharp that a new star appeared in Orion on the night on which Robert Browning died. The alleged fact is disproved by the statement of the Astronomer Royal, to whom it has been submitted; but it would have been a beautiful symbol of translation, such as affectionate fancy might gladly cherish if it were true. It is indeed true that on that 12th of December a vivid centre of light and warmth was extinguished upon our earth. The clouded brightness of many lives bears witness to the poet spirit which has departed, the glowing human presence which has passed away. We mourn the poet whom we have lost far less than we regret the man: for he had done his appointed

work; and that work remains to us. But the two beings were in truth inseparable. The man is always present in the poet; the poet was dominant in the man. This fact can never be absent from our loving remembrance of him. No just estimate of his life and character will fail to give it weight.

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